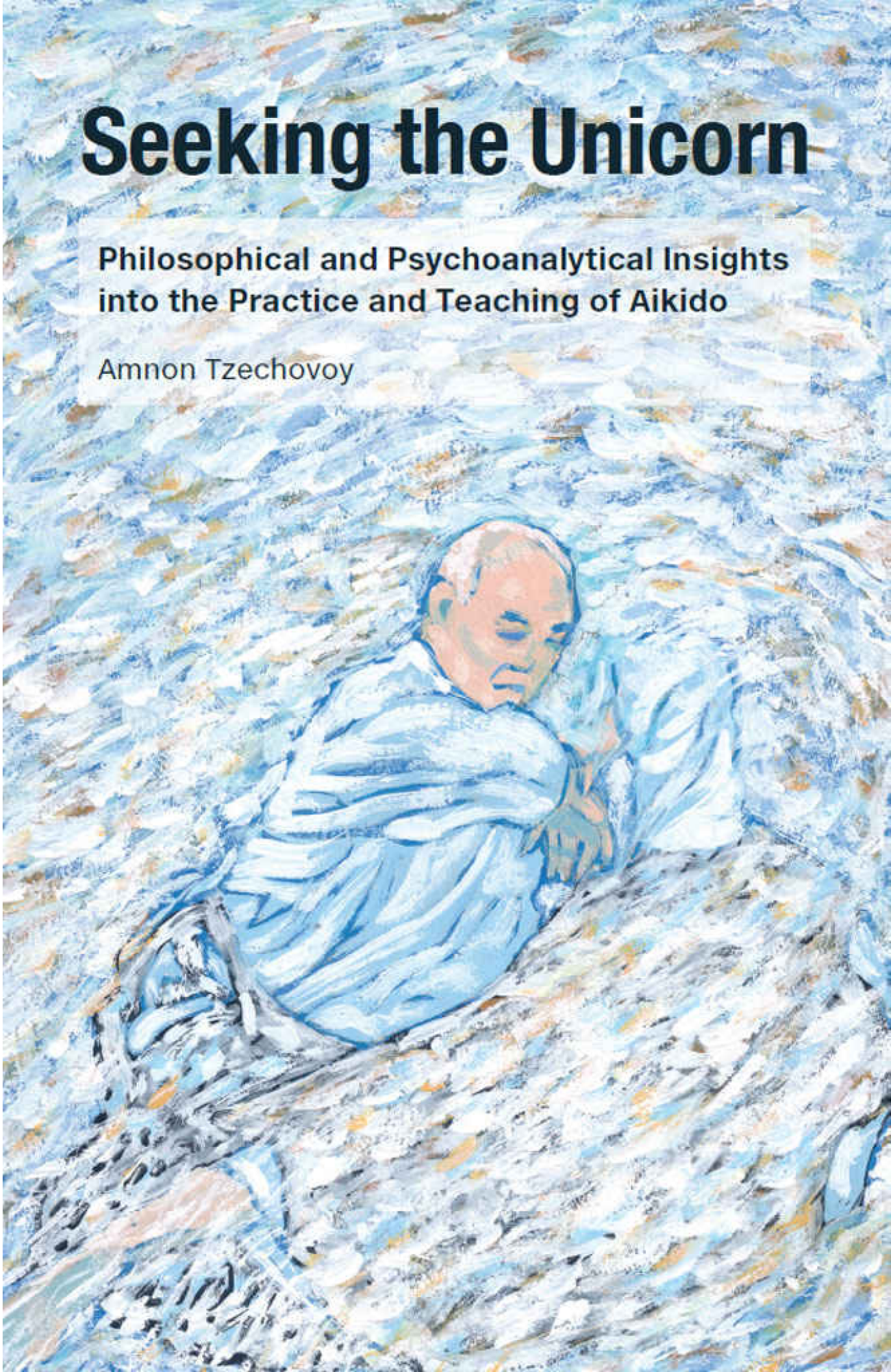
Seeking the Unicorn

Philosophical and Psychoanalytical Insights into the Practice and Teaching of Aikido

Amnon Tzechovoy



Seeking the Unicorn

Seeking the Unicorn

PHILOSOPHICAL AND PSYCHOANALYTICAL INSIGHTS INTO THE PRACTICE AND TEACHING OF AIKIDO

Amnon Tzechovoy

Copyright © 2015 Amnon Tzechovoy
All rights reserved.

ISBN: 1503390489
ISBN 13: 9781503390485
Library of Congress Control Number: 2014922688
CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform
North Charleston, South Carolina

To my wife, Iris,
and my children,
Itay and Assaf
With love

Acknowledgments

BEHIND EVERY BOOK IS A history. This book began almost a decade ago, written between work sessions in my clinic. At times the process appeared to be insurmountable, yet I was not alone in trying to bring it to completion.

First and foremost, I wish to thank my wife, Iris Kalka, whose dedicated involvement supported me throughout the process of writing and publishing. Without the encouragement of my friend Yohanan Grinshpon, I might not have embarked upon the project of writing this book. My very good friends Mercia and Haim Hazan raised many precious points in each and every chapter, and I hope I have managed to address most of them. Uriel Menuhin helped me find my way through the labyrinth of Greek philosophy, and Kobi Kremnizer contributed his vast knowledge whenever I felt my own was inadequate. My friend Ayala Rahav took the time to review the manuscript. Laurence Mergi Rapoport, a talented painter in her own right, contributed her amazing paintings for the front cover and the sketches inside this book. My editor, Sage Trembreth, was the one person who consistently worked on each and every paragraph of the manuscript, and, without her, this book would have never been accomplished.

I owe a great deal to both my teachers in the Birankai school of aikido and to my own students at A Mon Kan Dojo in Tel Aviv. They have enabled me to become the teacher I am today.

Amnon Tzechovoy

Contents

Acknowledgments
Chapter 1 Introduction (and more)
Chapter 2 A Dojo Is Born
Chapter 3 Seeking Harmony
Chapter 4 Remembrance: Efforts toward Effortless Being
Chapter 5 Reflections on Life with Injuries
Chapter 6 Falling and After
Chapter 7 Transformation through Repetition
Chapter 8 Keeper of the Kata
Chapter 9 The Complex Relationship
Chapter 10 Warrior Awareness
Chapter 11 Danger
Chapter 12 On Becoming Grand Master
Chapter 13 Heart-to-Heart
Epilogue
Glossary
Recommended Readings

Pencil and marker on paper
19.8 x 22 cm
February 2, 2015

Illustration by Laurence Mergi Rapoport
www.laulo.com

Introduction (and more)

"Let's talk for a while."

—CHIBA SENSEI

I ONCE HEARD A STORY about Louis Armstrong, a successful and famous musician known as Satchmo. The story goes that upon being asked how he had managed to achieve all the success he had, he answered, "I was walking in the street and found someone who advised me to turn right. I then met someone else who advised me to turn left. Hence, in the course of my life, I met all sorts of people who changed the course of my life."

Meeting T. K. Chiba Sensei changed the course of my life as it did so for many other people. Unlike Satchmo, however, I cannot neatly sum up what meeting Chiba Sensei has meant to me, so, instead, I have chosen to expand somewhat on the fragile nature of such encounters. My encounter with Chiba Sensei opened the gate to a most fascinating journey, beginning with my exposure to the Birankai aikido school to which I have belonged ever since.

The title of this book, *Seeking the Unicorn*, is not an arbitrary one. Mythical unicorns represent exalted virtues such as, purity, goodness, incorruptibility, and strength of mind and body. For me, my ongoing relationship and struggle with aikido, as represented to me by T. K. Chiba Sensei, has led me to see the art as a kind of mythical encounter that demands my utmost effort and devotion and my best self. This effort keeps

me vital and interested in the improvement that lies ahead of me. In *Alice in Wonderland*, the White Queen offers Alice jam "every other day," and Alice is confused because this seems to mean it is never the day for the jam. This is very similar to our progress in aikido, where it seems like improvement is always every other day, and we need to cherish the unicorn in our minds in order to keep seeking the path of aikido.

At times I have almost given up. In 2002 there was a thin line between my staying and leaving the school of Birankai. Fortunately for me, a dream came to my aid. My interpretation, or understanding, of the dream calmed me down and encouraged me to continue with my pursuit.

In 2002 I attended for the first time the annual seminar of British Birankai, under the auspices of Chiba Sensei. The seminar took place in a remote setting in Wales, one that would eventually become familiar to me. My train departed from London, and it was then, or rather four hours into the journey, that I was cut off from the world I knew and found myself alone and lonely. At that point, after fifteen years of training in aikido and five years as a teacher, I had acquired the rank of third dan, and I had trained with a variety of teachers from Japan, the United States, and other places. I was neither inexperienced nor new to the world of aikido. I had been to many seminars and thought I knew what to expect, though as it turned out, I had no idea what I was about to go through in this one. The seminar was a week long with sessions lasting from morning to evening. Once the classes began, I was struck by the intensity of the training, by the discipline, and by the way people treated Chiba Sensei. It was not my first encounter with him, but somehow this time was different. Chiba Sensei appeared to be remote and somewhat frightening, which explains why I was terrified. Never before in my life had I come across such a serious attitude toward learning or been exposed to such commitment to perfection. My immediate response, apart from shock, was to feel a void. I felt as if I knew and understood nothing whatsoever, and I became moody. A sense of emptiness engulfed me, and I could not escape the feeling I had wasted my time practicing aikido. Anxiety intertwined with a sense of emptiness. An inner voice kept nagging me that I should leave the seminar while I still could under my own power.

The dream came to me that night. In the dream I took my two sons, who were five and eight years old at the time, to a marina. They sat on one of the yachts kicking their feet back and forth and enjoying themselves. All

of a sudden, the clear sunny day with blue sky turned into grey, with heavy clouds threatening, rapidly, to fill the sky. The sea joined the scene with waves of water approaching the pier, growing tall. To my horror a huge, dark wave swept both boys into the black waters of the port. I managed to grab ahold of one son, but the other disappeared. There was no sign of him. He was gone.

I woke up completely terrified. The dream expressed an emotional storm and with it a great sense of danger. The message of the dream seemed to be that I was not protecting my children. I was fully aware that the material in dreams is always symbolic. I understood that the children were, in fact, representations of my knowledge and understanding, assets with which I had felt very secure until I was faced with this seminar and the new world of Birankai-style aikido.

The message of my dream was clear to me. The message was to cherish the knowledge I had acquired during my fifteen years of practice. Of course, I already knew this but, in my state of anxiety and loneliness, I had completely forgotten it. Once I remembered it, I was able to calm myself down and fall on the right side of the thin line, the side of staying at the seminar, and from that point on, nothing could stop me from fully participating.

The idea of writing about aikido did not occur to me on my own. There is a famous line in the movie *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* that goes, "When you have to shoot, shoot. Don't talk." The same notion exists in the aikido world. That is, it is important to do, to practice, not to talk or write about it. I was definitely one of the crowd adhering to this idea. However, at the end of a festive dinner for a seminar celebrating Chiba's forty-year career in Britain, Chiba Sensei turned to me and said, "Let's talk for a while."

Talking at the dinner party.

In the course of that conversation, Chiba Sensei took great care to explain to me that I was understood his ideas well, those ideas embedded in his Eastern mind and those expressed in the articles he had written. He wanted me to write, to translate his ideas, so to speak, to the Western mode of thinking. I was only too happy to answer his call. Here was a great opportunity for me to further elaborate my psychological and intellectual ideas from my experience with aikido. This book is the outcome of that conversation and my attempts to give form to my own experience. I am not sure I fulfilled Sensei's expectations, but I did my best to do so. My ideas germinate from Chiba Sensei's teachings, but I keep coming back to Chiba Sensei himself, because his personality and practice inspired me.

Some of my aikido friends, among them people who have trained with other martial art disciplines, are not keen readers on the topic of aikido or martial arts. For them written words are of little value. What is of value and utmost importance is physical practice. This I do not wish to contest. There is no substitute for serious physical training and conditioning. However, I still want to comment on the importance of philosophy and the written word in the martial arts' world.

The philosophy of Zen Buddhism played a significant historical role in samurai martial arts. William Scott Wilson, in his introduction to "The Life-Giving Sword" by Yagyu Munenori, describes this connection:

> It will perhaps not be going too far to declare that the philosophical and psychological foundation of the Yagyu Shinkage-ryu is Zen Buddhism. Zen permeates Munenori's [the well-known founder of this martial arts' tradition] explanations of the correct mental attitudes for swordsmanship.

Nevertheless, I want to emphasize that philosophical ideas and writing pertaining to the martial arts are inseparable from physical training. Or rather they have enormous potential for helping us discover new layers to ourselves and our practice of aikido and enrich our training experiences.

My own writing has been influenced by, among other things, my Jewish heritage. My interpretations of the world of aikido are by and large multilayered introspections emanating from my personal perceptions, and there are various shades and gradations to the process of forming perception, even when the process applies to tiny, concrete events.

To relate this kind of process, old Jewish scriptures used the word *Pardes*, which has come to mean "the Garden of Eden." Pardes refers to four approaches to interpreting text in the Torah that are also useful for pondering one's life, both in general and as a practitioner of aikido. The first Pardes approach is *Peshat*, which examines the plain or contextual meaning. The second is *Remez*, which looks at the allegorical meaning. The next method, *Derash*, is concerned with metaphorical meaning, and the last one, *Sod*, explores hidden meaning. There is often considerable overlap between these approaches.

I am always challenged by the possibility of seeing in banal, even trivial, events something much more—something that goes far beyond their concrete, simple (Peshat) meaning. I definitely seek the hint (Remez) so as to decipher the hidden meaning of an experience. It is my way of seeking the unicorn. The understanding I seek is sometimes private and closely linked to past events in my own life. Nevertheless, I do hope that some of these conceptualizations are shared by others. Hence, by writing I am venturing to reach other people, to touch them. I want to share what I have learned and discovered and how I have interpreted it. By sharing my personal journey, I hope I can help pave the way for the journeys of others on the same path. The understandings I share here go deep and impact my

whole life, by which I mean that they cannot be confined to just the aikidoka part of me.

Takuan Soho died in 1645. A moment before he died, he took a brush and painted the Chinese letter that signifies the word "dream," *Yume*. A dream for Takuan Soho, a Buddhist monk who contributed to the development of martial arts, is something complex. The Buddhist philosophy does not view death as a concept totally opposed to life. According to Buddhist tradition, there are some elements in our existence that stretch beyond current life. A newborn baby, for example, has already experienced some kind of life, in a very broad sense, prior to the moment of birth. So there is a sort of continuum of consciousness that lasts forever. A dream coexists alongside this continuum and presents elements of inner truth that embody those aspects in the consciousness. Moreover, a dream presents us with an ideal. The Zen Buddhist ideal includes aspirations that might not be reachable, yet it provides some guidelines and practices that can be utilized daily to strengthen the mind and soul of each of us. Dreams represent a condensed entity. They demand that one struggle and fight personal fears and anxieties and, as part of the process, grant one's life a meaning that stretches beyond the here and now. There is meaning to life as well as to death.

Earlier in this introduction, I referred to the psychological interpretation of my dream. According to my own understanding, there is no schism between a psychological interpretation and a Buddhist one in their respective approaches to the topic of dreams. In both schools of thought, a dream is a tool that assists a person and guides him or her in life. Likewise, for me there is no schism between the aikido world as it unfolds in the dojo and the outside world as it unfolds to everyone. Our mental lives and our levels of integrity accompany us everywhere.

Although the thoughts and experiences delineated in the book are all linked to aikido as a traditional martial art, some of them will apply to other martial arts. In fact I am convinced that people who train in iaido, jujitsu, judo, and karate, among other martial arts, will find ideas in this book that closely touch upon their own experiences.

A Dojo Is Born

"The name of your dojo is A Mon Kan."

—CHIBA SENSEI

THE BIRTH OF A DOJO is not unlike that of a child. There will almost certainly be difficulties along the way, yet in the end something new comes into being. A child is born into a specific family at a particular moment in time and within a definite cultural environment. Likewise, a dojo is born under specific circumstances, and like a child, it grows. As one of the first aikido teachers in Israel and a witness to the birth of the dojo at Tel Aviv University, I want to reflect upon some personal aspects of my journey and the birth of a dojo in the country of Israel.

In my twenties, I was a ballet dancer and teacher with everything being a dancer entailed. When I stopped dancing and teaching ballet, I was left with a void, a sort of vacuum in my life. It left me searching for something to reveal itself to me, something whose nature I knew would take time to unfold. While attending a large professional conference, I happened to see an aikido demonstration. I did not give a lot of thought to it at the time, but the name of the teacher, Eitan Ben-Meir Sensei, stuck with me, and before too long I contacted Ben-Meir Sensei and joined his dojo.

This was in 1986, and there were about thirty aikido students in all of Israel at that time. Ben-Meir Sensei had just returned from California to Israel after studying with his teacher, a disciple of Saito Sensei. Our dojo

followed the Iwama school, a style of aikido that traditionally put great emphasis on the use of weapons. Ben-Meir Sensei was a no-nonsense teacher and training sessions were very strict. The students who gathered around him to study aikido were a homogenous and idealistic group. We were all young, unattached to families or jobs, and eager to advance the cause of aikido. Soon the dojo began to flourish, and other Israelis, who had returned from their own training of aikido abroad, joined the aikido scene in Israel.

Ben-Meir Sensei was my first aikido teacher, and I was his student for about ten years. Eventually his life took him in a different direction and he left Israel. His departure created a crisis within our dojo, and within the aikido community. We found ourselves without a *teacher*, a master teacher, to support us and without contacts in the Iwama tradition. As none of us had yet acquired enough skill, expertise, and authority to replace Ben-Meir Sensei, our group dissipated, and each member began looking for a new source of support and guidance. Some turned to Duran Sensei, Seki Sensei, or Tamura Sensei. I, myself, was very eager to learn and decided it was a good time for me to sample everything aikido had to offer. I participated in literally every aikido seminar around. However, though eager and sincerely interested, it was as though I could not see the forest for the trees. The more exposure I had to the available aikido opportunities, the less I felt there was any direction to what I was doing.

A chance meeting with Chris Mooney Sensei changed my perspective altogether. His openness and generosity of spirit were striking, and soon after meeting him, I knew without a doubt that he was a sensitive teacher with a wealth of knowledge. I felt he accurately represented Birankai, the school of Chiba Sensei. Though I was no longer new to aikido, I once again felt completely enchanted, and this intoxication with aikido intensified in the course of my meetings with other teachers. My newly adopted convictions led me to commit myself to a new aikido style and a new teacher.

By the time I met Mooney Sensei, I have already been teaching aikido, following the Iwama tradition, at Tel Aviv University Sport Center for several years. My feeling of enchantment and commitment to my new path of practicing with Mooney Sensei in the Birankai tradition continued, but a feeling that I urgently needed to make changes in my own teaching and with my students in order to harmonize them with my new path, pressed on

my soul. I found myself in front of my students deeply concerned about how they would react as I told them of my decision to change the style of aikido practiced in our dojo from Iwama to Birankai. Soon after that meeting, most of the veteran students left our dojo, as if they assumed that their previous knowledge had suddenly become irrelevant or worthless. Some of the students, however, remained and became the avant-garde of the newly defined dojo. They were quick to adapt themselves to the new school and soon began to talk and think in the tradition of Chiba Sensei's Birankai aikido. Eventually the dojo attracted more and more students. In short, a baby dojo was born.

Let me describe the home of this baby dojo and the circumstances and cultural milieu into which this dojo came into being. Israel, in respect to practicing aikido, is no usual place in which to be born. It is a very small country far removed from the major aikido centers of the world. On top of this, the nation of Israel is continually under threat of war and often in a state of active war. Thus, this dojo was not born into a calm or quiet neighborhood. However, the circumstances of its birth proved to be an opportunity for me to assess and realize some of the values I hold in regard to my practice of aikido.

I vividly recall the first Gulf War (1991), when Iraq attacked Israel with missiles, and how I discovered a new depth and dimensions in my attachment to aikido. On one Monday evening, the day for our aikido class, all cultural events in the country had been canceled, and people were advised to stay indoors. Missiles were striking very close to my home and the dojo was located a thirty-minute drive away in the south of Tel Aviv. I wondered, "What about aikido class?" Certainly, just like every other public or cultural event, it was going to be canceled. Then I realized that I felt aikido, being a way of life, was not an ordinary cultural event. One does not stop breathing, being a father, or being a moral agent just because the circumstances are hostile or dangerous. Although we citizens were advised to stay home for our own safety, we were still free to move about, drive, and live our lives as we saw fit. I decided I was not going to cancel class. I was going to walk my chosen path, go to the dojo, and practice aikido. This was, of course, just my personal conviction and one not shared by most people, as became evidenced by the empty streets of Tel Aviv. The streets were empty like a ghost town before dark, except for people like me, people with a cause. I drove to the dojo for class and waited patiently in the empty

dojo until, finally, one student came to class. He was bearing the gas mask all we Israelis were supposed to carry for protection during the war. We conducted the lesson in the usual way, knowing all too well that, in the wide-open space of the dojo, we were not protected against chemical weapon attacks, should such a missile head our way. For protection against invasive chemical substances, people were instructed to enter small, enclosed, and hopefully sealed spaces—not the kind of environment in which one can practice aikido.

That experience revealed to me an aspect regarding the nature of aikido as it exists in my life. For me aikido is not an amusement or a pastime to be casually dismissed. For the serious practitioner, I think, aikido represents an internal spiritual essence without which we cannot exist. As it is an internal property of our being, aikido touches upon our innermost sense of authenticity, upon our very sense of self. As such, it helps us to develop a more complete nonverbal understanding of who we are. This primordial sense of understanding is directly embodied and imprinted into our movements and gestures. Just as a baby or a child comes to understand itself and its relationship with its parents through movement and internal understanding, so, too, the practice of aikido bypasses verbal language. The circumstances of the Gulf War opened my eyes to this meaning, this reality. Sometimes, indeed, harsh conditions and hard realities reveal one's true values and reality to oneself.

I do not, of course, claim that there are no other ways for one to acquire an accurate and immediate sense of self. Others may experience aikido in a way different from how I experience it, though I am pretty sure that what I am describing here can only be seen or felt from within; it is an internal experience of knowing. It seems to me that, in my case, the extreme conditions that are a part of our daily life here in Israel have somehow accentuated the role of aikido for me. I will never be able to leave it behind as I have no intention of living elsewhere.

The fact that Israel is far away from the aikido centers of the world affects the management of a dojo and, in particular, has an impact upon the various decisions one has to make when adopting aikido as a lifestyle and embarking on the long path of many years of practice. There is a difficulty in dedicating oneself to a specific school because there is no clear-cut route when one advances and wishes to learn even more. There is no shihan in Israel, which means encounters with such teachers are brief and not always

fulfilling. This also means the socialization process available here to the larger aikido world is generally lacking, including aikido etiquette, the rules that direct both the practice of aikido and one's relationships with teachers. There is no sure and safe way for one to become aware of his or her weaknesses. I travel to Europe to take aikido seminars, and though I have watched aikido videos for years, more than once I have learned of mistakes —mistakes I had not previously known I was making, due to the lack of external observation available to me in Israel. Naturally, considering the investment of my time and money in order to make those trips, such times were frustrating.

Despite these difficulties, I have managed to find teachers who not only teach me but, support me in my path. Now they are also willing to come to Israel to teach my students, and this progress accomplishes another stage of growth for me, my students, and our dojo.

In Israel today there are multiple aikido groups affiliated with the different strands of Aikikai (the original school of aikido). Our dojo, which is affiliated with Birankai International, has grown up from babyhood to become a rather independent young child. In 2014, in an act recognizing maturation of our dojo, Birankai Israel was formally recognized by Aikikai, the world headquarters of aikido, located in Tokyo, and Chiba Sensei honored this child with a name: A Mon Kan.

UNITED STATES AIKIDO FEDERATION
Western Region
3044 Adams Avenue, San Diego, CA 92116
Phone: (619) 280-0087 • Fax: (619) 280-7059

Amen-Kan

阿 A Infinite, Supreme.

門 MON Gate.

館 KAN House

A House (Gate) of the supreme wisdom. Respectfully submitted to Amen Tzedaway.

Seeking Harmony

"It exists in the depths of the human soul, which yearns for truth."

—CHIBA SENSEI

ANYONE COMMITTED TO PRACTICING AIKIDO eventually realizes that their thoughts, feelings, and motivations are as integral a part of their practice, as performing the specific physical movements. They discover that personal change takes place in that unique space created between partners repeatedly practicing the exercises on the mat in the dojo. They discover there is personal growth in the practice of aikido. I made the same discovery myself. In this chapter, I want to explore some of the relevant aspects of this personal growth from my own perspective.

My son once turned to me and asked, "Dad, who is the strongest aikido instructor in the entire world?" I hesitantly gave him my opinion, and he asked, "Who is your teacher?"

"Chiba Sensei," I answered. The name obviously rang no bells with him, and he promptly came back with his next question.

"Did you ever beat him?" he asked.

"No," I answered.

"And will you ever beat him?" he continued.

"No," I concluded. "I will never beat him."

This conversation may appear trivial, but my son had intuitively touched upon the focal point in aikido: the particularly harmonious

relationships between practitioners the discipline entails. This harmoniousness presents itself in the very name of the discipline. “Aikido” has been translated to mean such things as “the way of harmonious spirit” and “the way of unifying with life’s energy.” Indeed, abundant books and articles on aikido emphasize harmony as the quintessential characteristic of this discipline. The aikido concept of *awase* or *kimusubi*, refers to the ability to blend harmoniously with an aggressive attack. As we elaborate later, this implies the joining together of and openness to others that aikido teaches and enhances, among those who practice it.

Given the importance and centrality of harmoniousness in this discipline, it would be reasonable to assume that nothing but peacefulness and cooperation exist within the world of aikido. However, this would be an incorrect assumption. Conflict, personal rifts and rivalries, and egodriven motivation are part and parcel of the aikido world. For aikido practitioners harmony is desirable but not easy to reach and maintain. The explanation for the presence of these negative sentiments comes in two parts: the personal traits of those practicing aikido and the nature of aikido itself.

Harmony is not a monolithic concept, and in this chapter I refer to two different but complementary meanings. The first meaning of “harmony” touches on the relationship between human beings. Later on I will address this type of harmony as *kimusubi*, the ability and necessity to harmonize dynamically body to body.

Who are the practitioners of aikido? Why are they practicing aikido? What personal traits do they possess? There is no doubt in my own mind that a person dedicating so many hours to aikido is not doing it merely for the technical reason of becoming a more proficient fighter. There is obviously something much more deeply meaningful about it to those who practice. That the purpose of practicing aikido is not solely to become a better fighter is illustrated by the instructions given throughout any class. There is nothing that relates merely to the angle of an arm or leg or the trajectory or speed of a movement. Rather, instructions are intended to guide the student to ready himself for the changes that are expected to come to him right away and/or at some point in the future. These instructions, so often repeated throughout lessons, such as “Be calm and composed,” “Loosen your muscles,” “Flow with the movement,” and the immortal “Do not object,” point to the major aim of the aikido practitioner: The goal is personal change. The goal is transformation.

My perspective on the discord and disharmony among and within aikido practitioners and their choice to invest so much of their lives in the practice of aikido, where harmony is essential, is that we respond to unfulfilled needs and are motivated to work toward the resolution and satisfaction of those needs. In other words, considering both the non harmonious initial condition of an aikido community and the actual instructions given in the course of a typical aikido lesson, practitioners of aikido, consciously or unconsciously, seek solutions moving them toward harmony, cooperation, and a sense of unity with each other and within themselves.

Aikido is unique, with elements not found in any of the other martial arts. It offers battles with no winners and no losers, does not foster competition, and offers no motivation for hurting others. One might think that one of the consequences of these unique elements would be to render any hierarchy within the aikido community irrelevant, for how can one decide who is up and who is down when there are no winners and no losers? In theory, no matter how high practitioners are in the hierarchy, they are never really more proficient than anyone else, because no criterion exists within aikido to make such a judgment. But reality has proven to be completely different from theory. Partially this difference has to do with Japanese culture, which is based on hierarchical order, but the essential reason is that there are huge qualitative differences between the skills and understanding of students, teachers, masters, and grand masters.

The harmoniousness so central to aikido, prevails as long as no competition is involved in its practice. And this, of course, is a major value in aikido. Moreover, O-Sensei, the founder of aikido, and his prominent followers such as Tamura Sensei, Yamada Sensei, and Chiba Sensei, vigorously opposed any attempt to introduce competition into the aikido world. Inherent in competition are values such as aggression, violence, one winner, and a lot of losers, values counter to those of aikido.

Why do these values of non competition and nonviolence exist, and from what did they originate? Are they essential components of aikido, or could aikido exist without them?

Human beings are, by our very nature, aggressive. As far as psychoanalysis is concerned, aggressiveness is a primal impulse, meaning a strong unconscious and self-serving urge, present in each and every one of us. It is not difficult to imagine how giving into such primal urges could

easily have devastating consequences. At some point in our lives, each one of us has felt the power of aggressive impulses fueled by the power of negative emotions such as envy, greed, hatred, cowardice, or vengefulness. Within each of us, along with the primal impulse toward aggression, exist positive drives toward constructiveness and creation fueled by more noble emotions such as love, faithfulness, altruism, gratitude, and harmony. Perhaps more than most, aikido practitioners exemplify the need to overcome the aggressive and destructive rivalry grounded in human nature, and embrace the more positive and noble drives and emotions.

Many beginning and intermediate students of aikido become confused at the apparent conflict between not engaging in aggressive and violent practices, while, at the same time, developing in a discipline that involves intense and precise attacks. They might be too soft, weak, or lazy in their encounters with their opponent or too powerful and engage in a full-blown attack.

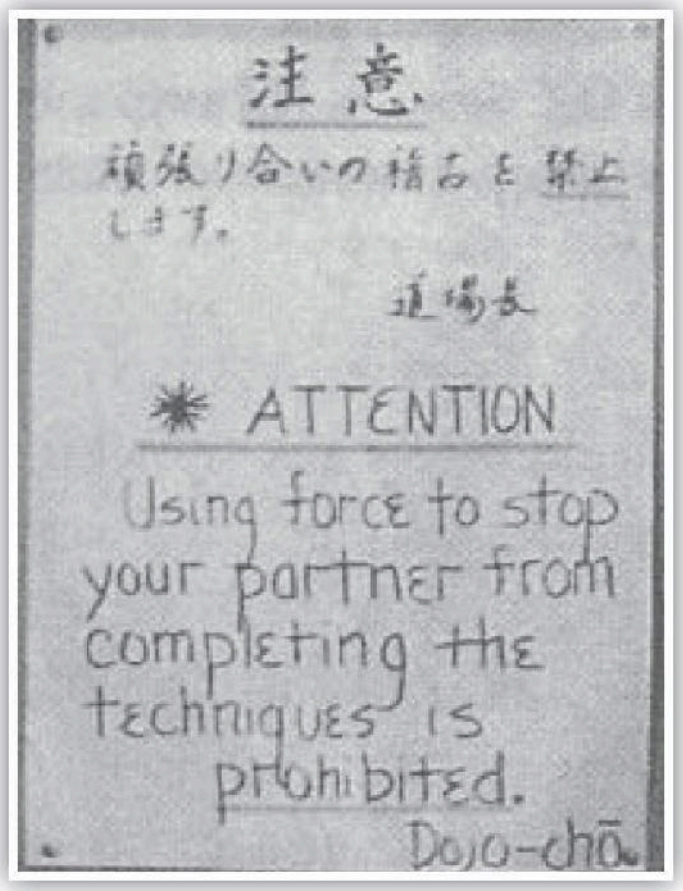
To be in harmony with ever-changing chaotic attacks is no joke. The level of one's ability to synchronize and harmonize himself to the explicit manifestations of aggressive attacks, as is to be expected from any martial art, naturally creates and establishes a hierarchy in the aikido world. The hierarchy in the aikido world represents, among other things, the practitioner's level of proficiency and expertise to blend harmoniously with any form of aggressive attack and to use the techniques in an efficient and effortless manner—the aforementioned kimusubi. The different levels of ability among practitioners, students, and teachers, won by sweat, blood and years of practice, reflect one's place in the aikido hierarchy. When my son asked me if I would ever beat my sensei, the answer reflected the enormous gap between my sensei and I, a gap that will never be bridged.

The metaphor of the unicorn introduces itself again and again. We are all constantly seeking to eliminate the gap and build the bridge, to harmonize our inner conflicts with the ever changing aggressive circumstances in the external world. It is a desire, a seeking, but never completed mission.

When Morihei Ueshiba, a warrior of the highest class who fought for his life more than once, developed aikido, he created a cohesive dyadic structure that enables us, practitioners, to continually confront our own destructive elements, so that we eventually become better human beings, both in our relationships with others and within ourselves. Often we fail,

but perhaps failure is the engine that powers the continuity of the struggle. This dyadic structure, a structure based upon a group of two, requires the practitioner to remain aware of, and safeguard himself and his sparring partner, protecting both from harm. As simple as it may seem, this basic dyadic component of aikido is what makes it absolutely unique. No matter with whom we practice, we always yearn to master our inner selves and strive toward improvement, which will manifest in the ability to tune ourselves to the other, more and more precisely and cooperatively. This quality of tuning in to another person is what pulls us away from self-centered ways of being and allows the development and evolution of the mutual reciprocity necessary for growth and transformation as an individual, half of a dyadic relationship, or a member of a community. It is no coincidence that a sign in O-Sensei's dojo states, "Disturbing your partner is totally forbidden."

The importance of harmony in aikido is in its role as a regulator. It steers us to develop and transform in ways that allow us to overcome destructive impulses. It is especially essential for us as teachers of aikido. As every teacher knows, not all students work harmoniously. Some students are not a natural fit for the practice of aikido. Their attitudes and movements are not flowing or soft enough. Yet they continue to come and practice, and this challenges our patience and skills as teachers. Other students are there to attack us, to test us to see "how good we are." We are aware we are being tested. This challenges our egos, and naturally we run the risk of resorting to destructive forces against such students. And we, as teachers, might also have some scars of our own, from childhood, some problems that might entice us toward destructive impulses. The tools of aikido empower us not to let destructive forces dictate our responses to difficult students and challenging situations. Aikido is a healing martial art, and through its methods we are less likely to respond violently or even in a remotely aggressive fashion, but the danger is always there. My own conviction is that no accident led us to aikido. We, who practice aikido are here to transform ourselves with aikido's healing qualities, and we learn to become grateful for its healing and transformative powers.



This announcement was hanging on the wall at O-Sensei's dojo.

Remembrance: Efforts toward Effortless Being

"The nature of the form is material and can, therefore, be destroyed or forgotten through neglect."

—CHIBA SENSEI

A CERTAIN QUESTION HAS BOTHERED me for years: If the art of aikido is inherently natural, a harmonious spontaneous flow, why is it necessary to exercise for so long and engage intensely in endless aikido practice in order to gain the smooth, effortless motion, the so-called natural and spontaneous movement?

Chiba Sensei's essay, "The Study and Refinement of Martial Awareness," provides some clues concerning the effort needed to achieve effortless motion. In the essay he diagnoses ailments inherent to our Western civilization that obstruct access to our innate nature: overdeveloped mental activity and conscious behavior. Overdeveloped mental activity interferes with the deep fundamental and innate logic of nature, normally manifested in all animals, and makes it almost inaccessible for men and women. Union with nature is the highest possible achievement for humankind, but such union requires, among other things, letting go of many layers of conscious mental activity such as incessant rational verbalization. It is a necessary return to a more instinctual way of life, free from the cultural coverings that prevent man and woman from being one with nature.

This oneness with nature is Chiba sensei's idea of complete, totally open martial awareness. He said, "I consider the term 'martial awareness' to be largely associated with a type of instinctive spontaneous sensitivity which gives rise to action that is altogether natural." His ideal of union with nature is, as I understand it, actually reunion with our lost heritage and with the potential for self-identification with nature. As we are engrossed in our Western culture, this reunion is not an easy task and requires extensive and repetitive aikido training.

Even so, the question remains: How can we understand the process of aikido transformation as leading to true martial awareness? Since Birankai aikido is closely associated with consciousness, as in the concept of martial awareness, we need to think not in terms of distancing ourselves from overdeveloped consciousness, but rather in terms of transforming consciousness

How can we achieve this transformation? In-depth remembrance can be helpful in our preliminary efforts to transform overdeveloped consciousness into aikido consciousness, the consciousness of martial awareness.

I borrow the concept of in-depth remembrance from the great philosopher Plato. In his dialogue titled "Meno", he attributes the following quote to Socrates:

> If the truth of all things always existed in the soul, then the soul is immortal. Wherefore be of good cheer, and try to recollect what you do not know, or rather what you do not remember.

In this beautiful dialogue, Socrates guides a boy by progressive remembering, to realize that he knows a certain mathematical truth - the Pythagorean theorem. The boy is a simple servant who has never learned any mathematics, but he brings to life the deeply buried memory of a sophisticated mathematical truth. He successfully retrieves an almost inaccessible piece of knowledge. Knowledge, according to Plato, is truly an in-depth remembrance of being and cognitions available beneath our current level of awareness and behavior. This is the type of universal, deeply buried or concealed, non individual mode of remembrance and awareness implied in Chiba Sensei's conception of martial awareness.

There are obviously big differences between the types of awareness possible to man and woman according to Plato and that type of awareness to which Chiba Sensei refers. I am using Plato's theory of knowledge, or awareness, as memory, in order to start thinking in terms of transforming overdeveloped consciousness into aikido consciousness. What matters to me is the awareness of layers of being, knowing, and consciousness, made newly accessible by remembrance, layers made available to us by virtue of our real, currently existing nature. We seek remembrance and awareness. We do not create martial awareness out of nothing.

As I now understand it, the question posed at the beginning of this chapter is answered with the knowledge that we, aikido practitioners, move toward effortless martial awareness by means of striving toward a special type of remembrance. It is through our harsh aikido discipline and the efforts we make, that we come to remember and be who we truly are, and perhaps, who we have really always been.

Reflections on Life with Injuries

"Injuries are like the medals worn by soldiers."

—CHIBA SENSEI

AIKIDO IS AN INTENSE PHYSICAL activity, and like all who engage in intense physical activities, its practitioners will at some point be injured. Injuries are part and parcel of such intense physicality and inseparable from the lives of those who practice martial arts. In referring to living a life dedicated to the practice of aikido, Chiba Sensei said, "The pursuit of the Way and its realization demand devotion, sacrifice, patience, courage, and understanding of the purpose of aikido." I believe the manner and degree to which we understand and practice these elements directly related to the injuries suffered by aikido practitioners.

In the world of martial arts, there is no shortage of incidents that exemplify the kinds of injuries that can occur; how they occur; or the consequences, sometimes dire, that follow. As both a teacher and practitioner of aikido for many years, I have personally struggled with pain, injury, and the resulting consequences. Along with aikido teachers everywhere, I have also watched my students struggle with these issues and strove to teach them to use their physical bodies and psychological mind-sets to prevent or minimize such injuries. Our experiences of pain play a pivotal role in the maintenance of our bodies by signaling to us when and how to safeguard ourselves and when additional action or attention is

needed. There are two main facets to the experience of pain. Preventative pain is a signal indicating that we should stop action, pay attention, or rethink a behavior if we do not want to experience harm. It gives us information telling us to rest or stop a certain action, or perhaps that a task is, as yet, beyond our strength or abilities and must be accomplished in smaller increments. In this sense preventative pain is a "good" pain. It is our friend. Remedial pain signals to us that injury has already occurred and that something needs to change if we are to heal, or not continue to further injure ourselves. Since the injury has already occurred, remedial pain might be considered "bad" pain. It is our teacher. For practitioners of aikido, as well as others participating in intense physical activity, it is of paramount importance to be able to proficiently distinguish between preventative and remedial pain.

It is not always easy to quickly distinguish protective pain from remedial pain as both kinds can limit our movement, come on suddenly or gradually, and feel like mild discomfort or excruciatingly unbearable agony. Our mind-body connection may restrict movement of a body part in order to prevent an injury or because injury has already occurred.

Significant injury can reveal itself slowly with discomfort rather than pain, such as the erosion of cartilage in a joint, or very quickly and with major pain, such as a torn muscle or a broken bone. Some people have low pain thresholds and experience strong pain reactions to relatively minor injuries, while others can tolerate major injuries with minimal pain. In addition, our mind-body connection can fool us if we are not carefully attuned to both mind and body. We can become excited to the point that our bodies fail to send the alerting signal that something is about to, or has already gone wrong. Or, if it has already been sent, we fail to recognize it.

Our bodies also sometimes protect us from awareness of the significance of a major injury. I remember all too well an injury I received when I first began my career as a teacher. I broke my wrist in the middle of a lesson yet did not realize the magnitude of the injury and continued the lesson to its end. Only once the lesson was complete did I realize the significance of my injury, felt the full impact of the pain, and sought help at the hospital. In addition to this, we bring our own personal attitudes and experiences of pain. For example, I have seen students who react strongly to pain and might stop training altogether over a minor injury. I have also seen students with similar injuries brush off the discomfort and carry on

with training, more slowly and more carefully, but still training. Distinguishing protective from remedial pain is not always clear cut even to physicians, so additional information and the patient's awareness of his or her own body is often needed in order to make a correct diagnosis.

In the world of martial arts in general and aikido in particular, those who train week after week and year after year place taxing demands upon their bodies. Injuries are waiting to happen to the practitioner who lets his or her focus slip for a moment, does not completely understand a move, is not aware of where his or her body is in time and space, does not know how to control his or her movements, or has a partner who makes a mistake. Because not even the greatest of our teachers began their aikido journeys as experts, it is no surprise that some of the top teachers, as well as longtime students, struggle with chronic injuries. Protective and remedial pain are training partners, always there waiting. I suggest that developing a mature mind, a mind well integrated with the body, is the way to cope with this phenomena of injury and pain as doing so better prepares and enables us to allocate each pain, protective or remedial, good or bad, friend or teacher, to its true role and impact upon our bodies.

Our bodies have proprioception, which informs us of the relative positions of our body parts and the amounts of strength being used for movement of those parts. Unfortunately for those practicing aikido, as well as other martial arts, without specific training our proprioceptive sense does not often guide us into making the perfect movements with the perfect amounts of strength. For instance, one of the more common experiences of students newer to the practice of aikido is a gap between seeing what the teacher demonstrates and being able to repeat the movements themselves. Within even only a few seconds of watching the teacher demonstrate a move, the student is unable to precisely replicate it. The gap between the intention to create a certain movement, proprioceptive sense, and the actual movement that follows, represents a split, a lack of mind-body unity, a lack of harmony. If the body is able to perform what the mind has intended, the resulting movement represents a psychophysical unity, a unity of mind and body, harmony.

I once went to Japan to train at the Hombu dojo with Miyamoto Sensei. The flight took about sixteen hours, and my body was stiff from fatigue and lack of movement. Once at the hotel, I realized that, if I hurried, I could participate in a lesson with Miyamoto Sensei right away. I was very excited

to be in Japan and about to have a lesson with this distinguished sensei. Miyamoto Sensei was also very glad to see me, as would be any teacher to see a familiar student who had made such a huge effort to attend a lesson, and he soon invited me to take *ukemi*. Sensei threw me to the mat with full gusto, as he often does, and my body failed to respond as my training told me it should. All of a sudden, I felt a sharp stab of pain, and I could not move my shoulder. In fact, as I tried to stand, I realized any movement at all caused me serious pain. I was injured, and the fault was mine.

Miyamoto Sensei and me, Israel 2004
(Photo: Ze'ev Erlich)

My attempt to train after a long flight when my mind and body were exhausted and my muscles stiff was folly. It is also an example of a psychophysical, or mind-body, split. In my mind's excitement to train at the Hombu dojo with Miyamoto Sensei, I had ignored my body and the messages it had sent about its lack of readiness to take ukemi and its need for rest and recuperation. I did not have mind-body unity, and I suffered the consequences. I was not only painfully injured but extremely frustrated to be almost paralyzed after only a few hours in Japan and at the thought of how futile it was that I had left my family, clinical practice, and students and come to Japan at great cost in terms of finances, time, and effort only to be almost immediately sidelined with an injury. It took me some time to see

that I had become the victim of my own excitement and ambition to train. I have come to realize that when strong ambition does not meet a correspondingly strong and coordinated body, a harmful outcome is quite likely. Had I been more attentive to my body, had I listened to its message of fatigue and stiffness and need for rest and waited until the following day to begin training, no harm would have come to me or to my training. Such awareness of both mind and body would have provided me with a vital safeguard against injury. For that kind of awareness, that kind of psychophysical unity, one needs a mind seasoned with life experiences and lessons learned.

The young, in particular, need to acquire mature minds. They are at the peaks of their strength, and their superior physical conditions combined with their youth and lack of life experiences often lead them to believe they are nearly immune to physical harm. This lack of seasoned judgment inevitably leads to injuries for them and often for their training partners.

We are not born with psychophysical unity, or if we are, we soon lose it, and a wide gap develops between mind and body. The gap is so wide that small children must constantly be supervised, lest their physical prowess outpace their limited understanding of their own abilities and of the dangers present in their environment and they become seriously injured or worse. As we grow up and our parents and teachers continually prompt us to consider the consequences of our actions upon our own safety, health, and wellbeing, and as we learn through our own experiences, the mind-body gap narrows, but does not close. Strong, healthy, youthful bodies are too often ruled by unseasoned minds with no genuine sense of the mortality of the physical body. Nevertheless, we continue to grow and develop, and if we are lucky, injuries may not be serious or leave a lasting impact. As we grow older still, the body gradually weakens, and repeated injuries inflict more serious damage; healing takes longer. Being aware and responsive to protective pain or other warnings our bodies may give to us is crucial for avoiding injury. Now, having a mature mind and closing the mind-body gap becomes more important than ever.

At this stage, sacrifice, patience, and devotion are needed. If our bodies signal the need for rest or to stop one exercise in favor of another, the seasoned mind will recognize that sacrificing what it wants to do in that moment and waiting patiently until the body is ready means the ability to continue training versus being sidelined with an injury. Devotion to aikido

is what can motivate us to comply with what our mature minds are telling us, is needed. This stage also requires courage to continue practicing aikido as we are so much more aware of the potential dangers. With a mature mind and psychophysical unity, we assess our abilities much better, and the match between our proprioceptive senses and our actual abilities can manifest in perfect harmony.

From my perspective, our abilities as aikido artists reach a more meaningful juncture as we become older. For the dedicated practitioner, performance improves with time, despite the process of aging. This ability is the outcome of long years of training that gradually result in close cooperation between mind and body. It is the unity brought about by the gradual closing of the gap, or split, between our perceptions of ability and our bodies' actual abilities. This realization takes time and experience. It is an unending process, a seeking to bridge the gap, which takes a lifetime and is never fully realized.

As I wrote at the beginning of this chapter, injuries are part and parcel of intense physical activity and inseparable from the lives of those who practice martial arts and, unless extremely fortunate, all serious practitioners are doomed to experience chronic injuries. Considering this, we might better understand Chiba Sensei, who once said that injuries are like the medals worn by soldiers, suggesting they might be a source of pride. I agree with this to the extent that medals, as well as our pain and injuries, mark an event in time and serve as metaphors for the personal growth and transformation resultant from that event. They are the road maps of our journeys.

The injury is thus a carrier of the trainee's memory of endless efforts through the years. It provides a sense of physical continuity. Memory and continuity are intertwined with our identities. The experience of injury and pain is absorbed in the memory muscle of our bodies to later become a major component of our innermost selves.

Christopher Nolan's film *Memento* portrays the engraved body as a memory carrier. It is a story of a man with anterograde amnesia, which impairs his ability to store new explicit memories, who has developed a system for remembering using handwritten notes and, what is relevant for us, tattoos. This man is on a quest to reestablish his constant memory and his constant identity, which are feeble and unstable. The tattoos were the trace of the actual memory lost, as are the scars and remnants of our

injuries. They are the traces of actual movements, finished a long time ago. The existence of injuries implies that at some point in time, there was a lack of coherence between the consciousness and the body, a psychophysical split. The injuries were the result of a mind-body split. We can also look at the issue from the other end of the spectrum: Injuries and pain can endanger our psychophysical harmony. They can be the cause of a mind-body split.

Psychophysical unity requires harmony between awareness of the body and the physical body itself. As long as this harmony exists, it is as if our bodies are invisible. We exist in both but, under normal circumstances, pay no special attention to either or to how they perform. There is harmony. Pain and injury create a disturbance in this harmony by calling attention to the physical body and its need for special care. Therefore, mind and body no longer work together in silent, more-or-less invisible harmony. For example, for many years I used my sword as part of lai Batto-Ho training. Over time I began to suffer from pain in both of my arms. This kind of remedial pain signals an injury and the need to remedy something so that harmony can be restored. I had developed a tennis elbow, and strong pain accompanied whatever movement I made. I tried resting, moving less, and taking medications in an effort to heal. Sacrifice, patience, and devotion, as well as some courage, are what kept me practicing aikido throughout the injury, and gradually I learned to move without pain. All of a sudden, I understood the message my body has been trying to communicate to me through the remedial pain. I gave up the more strenuous movement of the hands I had been making and adopted softer movements that have eventually proved to be much more powerful. My technique improved immensely. I still suffer from chronic inflammation, but the pain has ceased and my body has become ‘invisible.’ Again, harmony has been restored.

I clearly underwent a personal transformation through a process in which pain had a vital and motivating role. The experience of pain has had a major impact on both my personality and my behavior. I remember a time when I was both mentally rigid and aggressive in my movement. Pain both motivated and caused me to give up a large degree of my rigidity, to become softer and more flexible in mind and movement. Looking back I believe that pain gave me the opportunity to decipher what lay behind my motivation to train in martial arts. This motivation, I now realize, was a deeply rooted sense of invincibility, accompanied by denial. I spent many years in denial, not recognizing how fragile my body can be. I have come to

realize that my body is not an extension of my intellect; it has its own needs and demands.

One last example of the danger of lack of harmony or lack of mind-body unity in aikido, has to do with courage and harmony. In a typical aikido training session, trainees are attacked, and their senses of courage and harmony should dictate the outcomes. If the student faces the attack leading with courage, rather than fear, and with mind and body in harmony, the outcome of the attack will be positive for the student. If the student's mind and body are not in harmony, or if the student allows fear to take a leading role in his response to the attack, he will not respond effectively and is likely to be injured. The student led by fear may respond to the threat in an exaggerated manner or collapse in complete surrender. When the bodily response is out of proportion to the magnitude of the attack, or when motion suddenly stops altogether, as in the student collapsing, injuries are bound to follow. Thus, much of our training is devoted to conditioning young students' bodies. A body that is well prepared for its mission is a body that will be less rigid, less frightened and, as a result, healthier.

"The way of harmony of the spirit" is one way that the word "aikido" is sometimes translated from Japanese into English. Likewise, O-Sensei emphasized harmony as a crucial element in aikido. He had the concept of harmony and its importance figured out very early in his career, and I hope I have understood what he really meant when he emphasized harmony in aikido. While harmony can mean different things to different people and in different situations, I understand harmony to be first and foremost related to the ability to sense and interpret reality in a very precise manner. To gain harmony, to gain the ability to perceive and interpret reality with precision, is no trivial thing.

Falling and After

"Nice falling, Amnon."

—CHIBA SENSEI

THE SEMINAR WAS A FESTIVE event—a celebration of Chiba Sensei's forty years of teaching and aikido practice in England. For me it turned out to be one of the most surprising and thought-provoking events in my career. The seminar began as usual with the sensei demonstrating the moves and providing instructions, and the students following to the best of their abilities while the sensei watched and corrected them. I had practiced aikido with some of the most renowned teachers in the world, and I looked forward to my turn to engage with Chiba Sensei. I felt the expectation in the air and my own sense of anticipation and excitement about sparring with my sensei.

This time, however, was going to be different. Something unexpected was about to happen. As Chiba Sensei turned to me and signaled, I knew I was expected to attack him, and I did. Almost instantly I found myself lying on my back on the mat, alarmed by my emerging awareness that I had not acquitted myself well. I had not met the mat in the way I had spent years conditioning my body to take ukemi. I had not met the challenge properly. Chiba Sensei smiled and said, "Nice falling, Amnon." I was totally speechless.

I thought again and again about what had happened, and I must confess my ignorance about the exact sequence of events that resulted in me lying on my back on that mat. However, there was no doubt about my feelings; I was totally humiliated and full of shame. I had not lived up to expectations, neither those I had of myself nor those my beloved teacher had of me. Chiba Sensei continued to exercise with me in, what seemed to me, a softer manner as if to console me for my humiliation. But I was not consoled. I was totally immersed in my injured and devastated self-esteem.

Several years passed before I reached a deeper understanding of what had happened in that split-second encounter with Chiba Sensei. A casual conversation with him one day in France made me think of the whole thing again. While we sat and relaxed in the sun, I suddenly asked him a seemingly odd question: "Sensei, how did you feel when you attacked O-Sensei?"

"It was complete emptiness," he promptly answered. I did not understand at that time the relevance of his answer to the falling a few years prior.

At the time I was completely blind to the meaning of my fall. Then, one evening while jogging with my dog by my side, the pieces of the puzzle that had perplexed me for so long, finally fell into place. I realized that in the crucial moment of what I perceived as my disastrous fall, I had experienced not only a physical fall, but also a fall into emptiness. The falling into emptiness had been a transformation, and then I understood that it had been a transformation impossible for me to resist. At the moment of my understanding, I felt as if I had become motionless, though I had been running with my dog the entire time.

It was a transformation defying my old definition of myself or, rather, my old self, entirely. My years of aikido practice, all the exercises and techniques, could not have prevented that fall. But it was much more than that. Indeed it was the greatest gift Chiba Sensei could have given me. In a split second, for a split second, I had experienced the magical touch of O-Sensei. The emptiness that had swallowed me, the feeling that the surface had lost its solidity, was the same feeling that Chiba Sensei had described to me regarding his own experience with O-Sensei, and he had unconsciously transferred that feeling to me.

This begs the question, what was this transformation I experienced and how was I changed by it? The content of my transformation was very

private and idiosyncratic. Any other person having the very same experience might have responded in a different manner altogether. As for the structure of transformation, when one experiences an unexpected and difficult event, the trauma imposed on him or her leads to change, to transformation. I had arrived at that seminar as both a student of aikido and as a sensei confident in his art, only to discover a moment later how tentative and fragile my confidence had actually been. When I fell, my confidence shattered and shook my innermost security as a mature adult. In a way, Chiba Sensei exposed me to a raw experience that awakened capabilities within me that had previously lain dormant. Once these capabilities were awakened, I was not the same.

Ernest Becker in his book "The Denial of Death," touched upon my experience when he described the child as a natural coward and said:

> He cannot have the strength to sustain the terror of creation. The world as it is, creation out of void, things as they are, things as they are not, are too much for the child to be able to stand. Most of us—by the time we leave childhood—have repressed our vision of the primary miraculousness of creation. We have closed it off, changed it, and no longer perceive the world as it is to raw experience.

The nature and meaning of my fall at the hands of Chiba Sensei are more richly understood via the thoughts and writings of French philosopher Jean-Luc Marion, whose work is informed by the phenomenology school of thought. Phenomenology is the study of consciousness, the ways we experience things within and beyond the normal horizons of consciousness, the ways events appear and unfold their natures, and the meanings our experiences subjectively hold for us. Marion switched the focus from the external subject and object, or cause and effect, to focus inward toward the nature of phenomena in the mind.

For our purposes here, the two most important concepts to understand are those of donation and saturated phenomena. The term "donation" refers to the phenomena or stimuli presented to us—what happens to us. Marion explains, "Phenomena appear unconditionally and show themselves from themselves at their own initiative." The person experiencing the

phenomenon is deprived of any ability to resist it, as the experience forces itself upon the recipient, such as my fall at the hands of Chiba Sensei. Donation is very much about the phenomenon unfolding itself and revealing its nature.

Marion emphasized that the mind's response to a phenomenon, or stimulus, can be beyond one's known and expected range of responses. Stimuli capable of eliciting such an unexpected response do exist, and they often appear suddenly with no preceding clue or warning. When the person experiencing such a phenomenon responds to it in a manner beyond his or her known or expected range of responses, that person has experienced what Marion has labeled a saturated phenomenon. However, once people are capable of experiencing such phenomena, or donations, which are beyond the normal horizons of their consciousness, they are not only transformed, but the very act of receiving such donations effectively redefines who they are. This redefinition of self is the donation—in Marion's language—of the teacher, the donor, to his students, the recipients.

Donation is the essence of a teacher's contribution to his students. The students, of course, might fail to receive, but those who do receive the donation undergo transformation and development.

Chiba Sensei emphasized the immense difficulty of becoming a true teacher, a person capable of effecting transformation in his or her students. He noted that it is too common an occurrence that teachers do not realize the nature of their job and destiny. He summarized the challenge faced by those wanting to teach in the article "'Young Lions' Face Challenges:"

> Many young teachers, those who open dojos and start teaching without really being able to shift their awareness to being a teacher from what he or she used to be as a simple trainee, will face retrogression, most commonly without themselves knowing what is happening.

Chiba Sensei's words of warning become more meaningful with a better understanding of the saturated phenomenon concept. We all have in our minds a set of concepts with which to understand the things we are likely to experience in life; a set of cognitive skills with which to respond to the

phenomena; and intuition, which is a sensing or knowing without the use of rational thought processes.

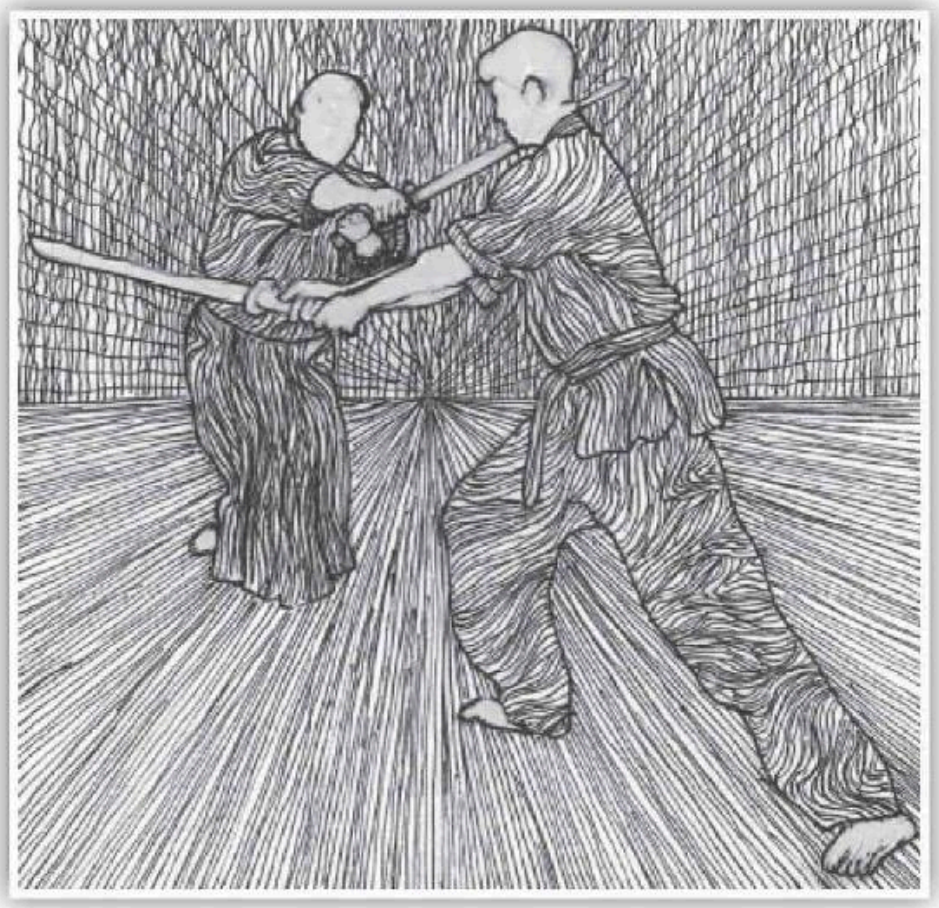
As such saturated phenomenon is effectively a consequence of excess and absence; the excess of stimulus and the absence of the cognitive tools with which to understand and deal with what is happening or what just happened to us. There is only intuition with which to meet the phenomenon. The excessiveness of stimuli is what defines the phenomenon for the one experiencing it, and this is exactly the source of its transformative value. A saturated phenomenon is what I experienced when I fell at the hands of Chiba Sensei. And, like me, a student may not be prepared for the teacher's donation.

Marion associated the ideas of saturation and donation with one's relationship with his or her own body. This association makes his philosophy pertinent to the aikido universe where the human body is of central importance. In my view, the relationships we sustain with our bodies define the lives we develop when we choose to walk the path of aikido. In referencing the body, Marion states, "It gives me to myself." For me, these words clearly express the essence and meaning of aikido practice, much of the implied relationship between teacher and student, as well as my own familiarity with the aikido way. My very own experience of falling in Chiba Sensei's presence epitomizes the meaning of the body in the process of redefining itself in our school of aikido.

This idea of the human body as a source of its own transformation was addressed by another French philosopher, Maurice Merleau-Ponty. He emphasized the paradoxical nature of the body as both feeling and felt at the same time. Everyone has a body, yet everyone lives in the presence of the need to become somebody, namely to rebecome.

My falling experience was undeniably a saturated phenomenon. It was beyond the normal horizon of my consciousness: unexpected, spontaneous, and unrelated to my twenty years of preparation and practice. All of a sudden, I was cut off from my old self and linear self-comprehension. At the time I could neither understand nor articulate the meaning of that phenomenon that flooded my being so vehemently, leaving me humiliated and disturbed by an acute feeling of shame. It took three years before I could truly make sense of what had happened. However, I have come to realize the gift Chiba Sensei gave me, namely making me capable of redefining myself, transforming, and falling into emptiness. We teachers in

our schools of aikido should understand our moral responsibility toward our students. Indeed, as our teachers moved us to encounter our bodies in new and unexpected ways so, too, must we cultivate the ideal of moving our students. It is our moral obligation, no more, no less.



Pencil, marker, and
gouache on paper
15.9 x 16.2 cm
Feb. 2015

Illustration by Laurence
Mergi Rapoport
www.laulo.com

Transformation through Repetition

"One must then let it go."

—CHIBA SENSEI

I FIND MYSELF PONDERING THE many years I have dedicated to acquiring skills based on one transient movement of which, once completed, seemingly nothing remains. What motivates us, as practitioners of the martial art of aikido, to repeat and practice the same movements year after year, despite the results often being disappointing?

Aikido training is unlike training in other martial arts or competitive sports in several respects. In general, competition with others does not play a significant role in aikido. There are no external criteria for judging when someone has won or lost. Nor are there any aesthetic criteria for judging aikido, as in the case with dance or other musical arts. Rather the criteria for judging a "good" or "bad" performance are internal and invisible.

I believe training in aikido involves a stage-by-stage process of personal growth and fulfillment, but what else is involved in aikido? What motivates us to practice, repeating the same movements again and again, year after year, and how do we judge our progress? A discussion of kata, weapons, and Greek and Zen philosophy will hopefully shed some light on these questions.

I began focusing on these issues after having had the honor of a visit from Aki Fleshler Sensei. He and I sat at a cafe at the Land of Israel

Museum and did as any two instructors of aikido might do under similar circumstances: we had a casual conversation over a cup of coffee.

During the conversation, I shared with Fleshler Sensei my vague sense of frustration about my personal understanding of my own aikido practice. I told him that my wife had asked me why I practice raising my hand above my head and lowering it, over and over again for years, then told him the ill-defined answer I had given to her about a search for the right movement. I had to admit, though, I was asking myself the same question.

I asked, "Isn't it crazy, Aki, that only toward the end of my life, after forty or fifty years of exhaustive training, only then I might be able to perform a few good movements?"

He smiled and told me this story:

> There was a three-day iaido seminar featuring the late Mitsuzuka Sensei. At this seminar we performed ten thousand *shomenuchi* cuts, in *kiba-dachi*, with *KiAi*. It was, needless to say, both physically and mentally grueling. At the end of the seminar, I heard Chiba Sensei remark to one of the other teachers there, "I think I had maybe one or two good cuts somewhere in there."

Fleshler Sensei's story about Chiba Sensei reminded me of how many times I had watched Chiba Sensei performing his sword form and wondered what types of movement he considered to be good.

I think about my students watching my movements, and I wonder how they distinguish good movements from the bad ones, yet I know I have no control over their perceptions of my movements. They might not build the right inner judgment to separate the wheat from the chaff, and this, of course, worries me a great deal. My concerns are not merely about the technical aspects of aikido, not merely about my students differentiating well-formed movements from poor ones by watching me in action. My concerns are also about which principles of aikido they internalize in the process and what personal growth or transformations they prepare to make, built upon what they internalized from watching my movements. It is a special challenge for teachers because, in aikido, these important qualities are internal and not readily visible to observers.

In the practice of aikido, the sword rises and falls, again and again, always in an attempt to reach one's personal and internalized concept of an Ideal movement. For our purposes I am defining "Ideal" as the concept of perfection in movement we develop as a result of our repeated interactions with a teacher whom we consider to be a master, or grand master. It's combined with our own personal experiences of physically completing the movements many times over many years. This Ideal or Idea is the criterion for a perfect movement.

In every movement made in aikido, the practitioner makes a comparison between his or her internal criterion of the Ideal movement, the movement just completed, and the movements previously performed that were closer to, or further away, from the Ideal. This comparison is often performed with only partial awareness of the process and, sometimes, with no awareness at all.

The memory of the aikido movement is crucial to learning because the movement, once complete, ceases to exist. It exists, and in the flash of a moment, it is gone. What is left is just the trace of a memory that the mind tries to grasp in order to imprint the physical movement into one's body, almost as one tries to hold on to a dream upon awakening.

Plato was an ancient Greek philosopher who lived and died more than two thousand years before aikido was developed by O-Sensei. Surprisingly, what Plato had to say more than two millennia ago meshes very well with what I am trying to convey here about Ideals. According to Plato, the world that appears to our senses is in some way defective and filled with error, but there is a more real and perfect realm, populated by entities that are eternal, changeless, and in some sense paradigmatic for the structure and character of our world. Plato's character Timaeus, in the "Timaeus" dialogue, expresses it beautifully "First, I must distinguish between that which always is and never becomes…, and that which is always becomes and never is…"

The constant movement toward a perfect form and the guaranteed failure of ever reaching this goal characterize the reality in which we live. We are constantly striving for perfection in movement and falling short. This reality of striving for an unreachable perfection, however, is different from the Idea of a world in which this perfection exists. Although our behaviors and efforts may change, the Idea of the reality remains constant.

When we make a movement in aikido, the power that creates the form of the movement is anchored first and foremost in our consciousness. Every movement or technique is an embodiment and expression—an imperfect and lacking one—of perfection, of the Idea. An Idea is eternal, as Plato emphasized. So to put this all together, the Idea is unchanging perfection, which we always seek but never attain. There will always be a gap between our best efforts and perfection.

The unicorn is a metaphorical example of an Ideal concept. It represents to us the highest and purest virtues to which we can strive but will never reach.

The gap between the Idea and its realization explains why it is so difficult to learn from an aikido instructor only by watching his demonstrations. The Idea the instructor holds of the perfect movement is not visible, and his external movements do not necessarily convey what needs to be learned. We can see only the external actions, the visible performance, of the teacher, while the internal part, the Ideal toward which he strives, is always hidden from view. The integration of the internal Idea and the external performance takes place in the body of the teacher. Because this is not something readily visible to the students, however, it is helpful for the students to touch the teacher while he or she practices. This contact provides the students with valuable information as they can feel the intensity, power, and high technical level of the teacher, and it provides the teacher with the ability to demonstrate what is missing from the students' movements. In a strange way, this immediate feeling of incompetence, this understanding of the huge gap in skill and power between teacher and student, reveals for the students the hidden Ideal of the movements. The information students glean from touching the sensei as he or she completes the movements is transformed into the students' Idea, their inner sense of the perfect movement. The practice of aikido demands the repetition of movement that, each time, allows a hint of contact with the Idea.

Kata is traditionally defined as an established combination of positions and movements in a martial art, and each martial art has its own unique katas. Aikido is a multifaceted martial art. It prepares its practitioners to effectively deal with an aggressive reality while simultaneously demanding a personal consciousness continually progressing toward enlightenment. Through the kata the external and internal facets of aikido are embodied and expressed. The kata serves as a bridge between the Idea and the

random, ever-changing, and even dangerous external reality. If faced with a raging oncoming threat, one needs to act effectively to meet it, or in other words, one needs to translate the Idea into practice.

In his article "Structure of Shu, Ha, Ri, and Penetration of Shoshin," Chiba Sensei explained:

> "Kata" has been translated into English as "form." However, "form" seems to cover only one part of a larger whole, superficially limiting it to the physical appearance of kata. While "form" covers only a physical part of the whole, the visible part of the kata, there is another element that works within, which is invisible in nature. It is internal energy associated with the flow of consciousness [ki]…Kata, therefore, does not limit its meaning merely to its physical appearance. This can be taught and transmitted physically with reasonable effort, as it is visible. However, the internal part requires a totally different perspective and an ability to master it. Since it cannot be seen physically, it cannot be taught but must be sensed and felt…The kata then breathes, manifests, comes to being, and dies at the moment of execution. One must then let it go.

Although aikido did not exist during the time of Plato, it is as if he was paving the way for the kata. The Ideal exists in a perfect realm and acts to give structure to our world, the external world of reality that we experience via our senses. The kata facilitates movement between these two worlds with one facet facing inward toward the Ideal and another facing outward toward external reality. The continual back-and-forth flow of focus between these two facets gradually bridges them and strengthens both the external reality and the Idea.

The existence of movement is both transitory and unstable. This is the case because the very second we complete a movement, that movement ceases to exist. To the degree in which we live in the concrete world via our bodily movements, our existence in that world is also fleeting and unstable. This worldview—in which there is constant communication and motion between the stable, permanent Ideal aikido movement and the transient external appearance of that movement in the world—leads us to the

Buddhist concept of Zen and especially to the Ideas that have accompanied Japanese fighters into battle throughout generations. Concepts within Zen Buddhism undoubtedly influenced the prominent teachers who contributed to the development of the world of aikido.

Zen Buddhism, similarly to the Platonic philosophy of Ideas, stresses the importance of directing our attention to our internal world and the need to limit ourselves from focusing on the external world, which is viewed as transient and subordinate to the inner Idea. Zen philosophy rejects cognitive rationalizations and focuses instead on the instinctive life force, the right here and right now, preparing the human soul for unbiased encounters with reality. Samurai warriors adopted Zen Buddhism as they found practicing it valuable in terms of making them modest and self-disciplined fighters. The philosophy and practice of Zen trained the fighters to look inward, toward the Idea that guided them, in order to focus and realize their full potential under conditions in which external commotion threatened to impose chaos. Zen theory is known to have had an impact on Japanese martial arts in general, and on aikido in particular. It enables warriors to sharpen their senses, maximize their inner abilities as fighters, and face reality calmly.

In aikido training, movements can be performed with or without weapons. To illustrate the necessity to have the accessibility to both inner Idea and the external reality, I refer to training with weapons, especially a sword, because doing so demands a more complex and dynamic relationship between my internal and external realities. In order to wield the sword in a movement more closely approximating the Ideal, the aikido practitioner must cease to view the sword as a foreign object and begin to relate to it as a part of him or herself.

Sword training is primarily a search for the Ideal movement through a quiet motion, directed at the opponent, which is both powerful and effortless, never resting. The movement of one's sword is perceived by the wielder as an external action, a movement directed outward toward the opponent. However, before the sword can be directed outward, it must first be directed inward toward the Ideal we hold in our minds. Striving to conform to the Ideal sword movement in our minds is what directs the actions we take with the sword in the external reality.

Prior to each movement we make with our bodies, we must first appeal to the image of that movement within our consciousness to know how to perform it. When we make a cutting motion with the sword, or with an

empty hand, we make the movement inward toward the Ideal in our consciousness and simultaneously follow through with the physical movement in the concrete world. When we move in the physical world, we move in a direction dictated by our inner understanding. Our adversary and the weapon we use to defend ourselves are internalized and become a part of us. Although we may cut our adversary with the sword in the concrete world, at the same time, our movement is internal, and in that sense we also cut ourselves. Recent research within the field of embodied cognition supports this idea, showing that merely thinking of a specific action results in activity within the same area of the brain that would be activated if we executed the movement in reality (Vittorio Gallese for example).

Eugen Herrigel addressed the relationship between the internal Idea and external reality, as it relates to the practice of archery, in his book "Zen in the Art of Archery". He stated:

> Should one ask, from this standpoint, how the Japanese Masters understand this contest of the archer with himself, and how they describe it, their answer would sound enigmatic in the extreme. For them the contest consists in the archer aiming at himself and yet not at himself, in hitting himself and yet not himself, and thus becoming simultaneously the aimer and the aim, the hitter and the hit.

This explanation also describes the dual faces of the kata in martial arts. When we raise and lower the sword to cut, the sword becomes an integral part of us. We aim at the inner Idea, at ourselves and not at ourselves. We cut the other, as well as ourselves. To the best of my understanding, the statement that "the sword is the soul of the Samurai" expresses this concept. To further explain, the sword exists in two places at once. It exists as a reality in the physical world and as an Idea in my mind. Before I can wield the sword in the physical, external world, I must first refer to the Idea of the sword in my mind to know how to make the movement that I desire to make. Once I have referred to the Idea in my mind, that part of me goes out into the external world as I make the movement the Idea instructed me to make.

To better understand this transformation, I want to introduce the concepts of the "familiar," the "other," and the "strange." The familiar is something we know. We recognize its nature and understand that we share attributes with it. The other is something with a nature different from our own. At their extremes, the familiar and the other share zero attributes. The strange is that point where the familiar and the other meet or overlap. The strange is something slightly similar to us, something with which we share some characteristics, but is also different from us with attributes unique to the other. When faced with the familiar, one often feels a sense of longing, a desire for connection and belonging. In contrast, when faced with the other, one often feels a sense of fear or dread. Attraction and fear are two emotions or processes that can occur simultaneously in the strange.

This brings us back to the two facets of the sword, which are its actual existence in the physical reality and its representation that exists in the internal reality of the mind. When we practice a movement again and again, we move closer to the absolute, but unreachable, perfection of the Ideal movement. If we are using a weapon, the essence of the weapon and our relationship to it must be internalized for us to create the Ideal needed for effective movement with it. As long as we view the sword as other, something completely alien to our internal subjective world and existing only in the external physical world, we cannot build an Ideal that includes it. A transformation needs to occur in which we bridge this gap between our inner selves and the sword. We build this bridge by accepting that we share attributes with the sword, transforming it from *other* to *strange*. Perhaps we choose to see the sword as an extension of our arms or see our battle attitudes as hard, like the steel of the sword. Self and object transform into one entity, a sort of self-object, which contains elements from both worlds. Once we recognize that we have attributes in common with the sword, we can internalize it and form the Ideal. This new Ideal becomes the goal toward which we strive in movement. Its existence informs our aikido movements, and our skills improve.

This process transforms the properties of the sword as we perceive them both in the external world and our inner world. The kata serves as the mediator between these two worlds, bringing them into unity and offering the aikido practitioner an almost infinite experience where every movement of the sword occurs simultaneously both in the inner world and the outer one.

Training with the sword presents us with more than one dichotomy. The sword both attracts and threatens us at the same time. It has the power to kill or seriously wound an opponent, but it can also injure or kill the wielder. Although the sword may be the best means available to the warrior to defend him- or herself against a threat, one must remember that the sword is not forgiving, not even in practice sessions. One moment's lapse in concentration during training is liable to end in injury. At the same time, it is exactly this danger that attracts the sword wielder. The danger and demand for constant diligence present an exhilarating challenge that makes the aikido practitioner want to draw the sword from its *saya* (sheath) and accept the challenge.

This phenomenon, in which both attraction and repulsion exist within someone simultaneously, is associated in anthropology literature with the concept of numinousness, a feeling of holiness or divinity. It is no wonder, then, that the sword is associated in Japan with the sacred. The Japanese view the sword as an extension of the person wielding it and attribute magical powers to it. The sword is described similarly in the Bible "King James Bible", in Genesis 3:24, which says, "So He drove out the man; and He placed at the east of the Garden of Eden the cherubim, and the flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way to the tree of life." "He" is G-d, of course, the absolute infinite, who places the sword at the entrance of the Garden of Eden and grants it attributes of timelessness. As in the Japanese culture, the weapons that invoke attraction and fear in people are connected to the numinousness concept. Moreover, we might speculate that this connection is essentially universal as two wholly separate cultures identify the sword with magical powers.

Our ability to build an Ideal by transforming the other to the strange via recognizing and internalizing common attributes is not limited to the use of swords or other weapons in aikido. The ability to transform the other into the strange is an adaptive mechanism that can serve us to deal more effectively with violence that threatens us in our aikido practice or in the world outside of the dojo. For example, one of the five guiding principles in an aikido practice is that of connectedness. However, connectedness is not possible with the other and can be realized with only the familiar or the strange. Connecting with a violent attacker, for instance, does not imply that you are expected to be nice and make friends with the assailant. This connection has to do with the concept of kimusubi, seeking, recognizing

and blending with the energy and movements of the attacker in order to deal more effectively with the attack.

In aikido training we simulate aggressive physical attacks. Such attacks are not commonplace in everyday life. We are not accustomed to being physically attacked, and when it occurs on the tatami (training mat), our instincts shout, “Here is a danger. Here is a threat.” Except for the more experienced aikido practitioners, we are liable to immediately deprive the attacker of the element of familiar and label him as other, as something for us to fear. The ability to connect with a violent person presumes some degree of peace of mind on the part of the aikido practitioner, but if the attacker is perceived as a complete other, the aikido practitioner will most likely experience fear and panic, conditions under which it would be impossible to meet the attack in a calm and efficient manner.

The process of attributing components of otherness to an adversary, and the consequences for doing so, is exemplified by the experience of one of my students. At the beginning of her training in aikido, she saw the training partner who attacked her in practice as an enemy with the characteristics of otherness. That frightened her nearly to death and impaired her ability to effectively meet the attack. Nonetheless, she continued to practice, even though at times she burst into tears in an expression of her fear. As I perceived the process, she slowly granted a measure of familiar to the person attacking her. This process, which took a long time to evolve, gradually allowed her to remain calmer and quieted her fear of her opponent, enabling her to respond more effectively to the attack. Over the course of years of training, she succeeded in identifying the attacker as stranger rather than other. She went through the kind of positive consciousness transformation that I have been discussing here.

Work with the sword can benefit us in our encounters with unfamiliar people outside of the dojo, people whose motives are unknown or who perhaps seem threatening. If we can turn the sword, an absolute object, into part of our inner selves, it will be so much easier to perform a similar transformation with an unknown or threatening person. Once we acquire the ability to move along the continuum of otherness-familiarity, we can grant to others the status of strangers, thereby increasing our peace of mind and our ability to remain calm to deal most effectively with whatever situation presents itself to us. Such methods of transformation can bring about an

expansion and development of our capabilities both as practitioners of aikido and as human beings.

Keeper of the Kata

"The kata then breathes."

—CHIBA SENSEI

TO BE A TEACHER IN a school of aikido is to accept the task of kata keeper. One of my main goals as an aikido teacher is to have my students achieve proficiency in all aspects of the kata, and I believe this goal is shared by teachers in any martial art school that possesses well-defined kata. The task of kata keeper requires a great deal of conformity on the part of the teacher, but blind adherence to traditional kata may have a negative impact on the martial art, making it stale and lacking in vitality. I have noticed that teachers who allow the kata to grow stale lose interest and abandon the art. So an important aspect of being the kata keeper is to combine tradition and conformity with individualism and creativity in order to nurture the vitality of the art and preserve its spirit.

There are two diametrically opposed forces in a school of aikido such as ours. One is a force of conformity. This type seeks to unify the thoughts and behaviors of instructors. It acts toward establishing a uniform, traditionalist type of teacher, and under the impact of this force, the teachers tend to resemble one another, thinking and acting within the dictates of the school. The other force is one of individualism. This type seeks unique modes of behavior and thought. Under the impact of this kind of force,

instructors tend to express themselves idiosyncratically, often deviating from normative ways of teaching.

The inherent conflict caused by the presence of these two opposing forces within our aikido tradition brings to mind a controversy between two of the greatest Western philosophers of the twentieth century, Ludwig Wittgenstein and Gottlob Frege. Wittgenstein adored Frege and considered him a spiritual master, yet he criticized Frege in one essential area: Wittgenstein believed that when arguing a point, one should attack the rival's strongest positions, while Frege focused on attacking the rival's weakest positions. According to Wittgenstein's point of view, one could not overcome an opponent's argument by attacking the weakest point because the opponent could always bolster and improve the weaknesses. On the other hand, overcoming an opponent's strongest positions would finish off his or her stance altogether. Wittgenstein is known to have said, "Go the bloody hard way"(Christopher Hamilton).

This saying is meaningful to me because it expresses the essence of our school. If we want to create better teachers and schools, then we need to inculcate Wittgenstein's attitude into our minds and seek to free ourselves from the faults and shortcomings of previous generations of teachers. We need to improve ourselves beyond the limits of the past. When Mooney Sensei told me it was time for my fukushidoin (teacher's assistant) exam, I realized that, after many years of teaching and instructing, there was a substantial gap between my conceptions of what was possible for me to accomplish and what I was actually accomplishing. I realized that in order to become a truly reliable and worthy teacher in our school, I had to transform myself the hard way.

It was, in a way, the spirit of Wittgenstein inviting us to renounce what we had learned in the past to make room for new developments, developments often different from what we considered our stronger points. It is, indeed, emotionally very difficult to accept our true imperfections. Many schools focus on the strengths of trainees while ignoring their weaknesses, which presents a skewed picture of strength. In my opinion, not only is change not to be feared, but transformation and development constitute the core of our school's value system.

How do we actually enact this transformation? One thing is clear: complacency should be avoided by all means. Master and disciple alike should be encouraged to dedicate themselves with new spirit and vitality to

a high standard in both their practices and functions while, at the same time, taking care that no disciple feels disheartened or at a loss during the transformation. The subtle boundary between the old way and the new way should be made visible and alive.

Chiba Sensei and his disciples created a coherent and cohesive system of specific characteristics and attributes embodying the spirit and values of the new approach. Any aikido practitioner experiencing this particular combination of spirit, formidableness, and movement in the functioning of our teachers will recognize what I mean. Maintaining this spirit is the task of the next generation of disciples in this school of aikido.

Our new tradition asks for not only bodily transformation but also seeks an ethical transformation through focus on values and spirit. Rather than focusing solely on our strengths in our training, we also need to realize our imperfections and weaknesses as we face both ourselves and our opponents. We work from the body toward the desired character traits of our school. In this way we strive toward establishing a common personality of masters and disciples working together for survival in changing times and hard circumstances. In this respect the force of conformity is present in our individualistic school and tradition.

Yet we also seek individuality in our disciples, teachers, and masters. There are some old Hassidic tales that speak directly to this issue: Rabbi Bunem was old and blind. When asked about a wish to be Abraham the Father, he said, "No, I prefer to be myself, as I am, for what is God's benefit for Bunem being Abraham, or Abraham being Bunem?" There is also the tale of Rabbi Zussia, who visualized himself in heaven then said, "I won't be asked a question such as, 'Why have you not been Moses?' but rather the following one: 'Why have not you been Rabbi Zussia?'"(Martin Buber)

Thus, tension between conformity and individuality is obvious. As powerful and dominate as Chiba Sensei has been in the world of aikido, the individuality of the teachers and masters following him could never be suppressed. Nor would he want to suppress them. We who follow Chiba Sensei will never be able to be exactly like him, as he was not exactly like his master, O-Sensei. This is not a failure but rather a challenging reality valuing individuality.

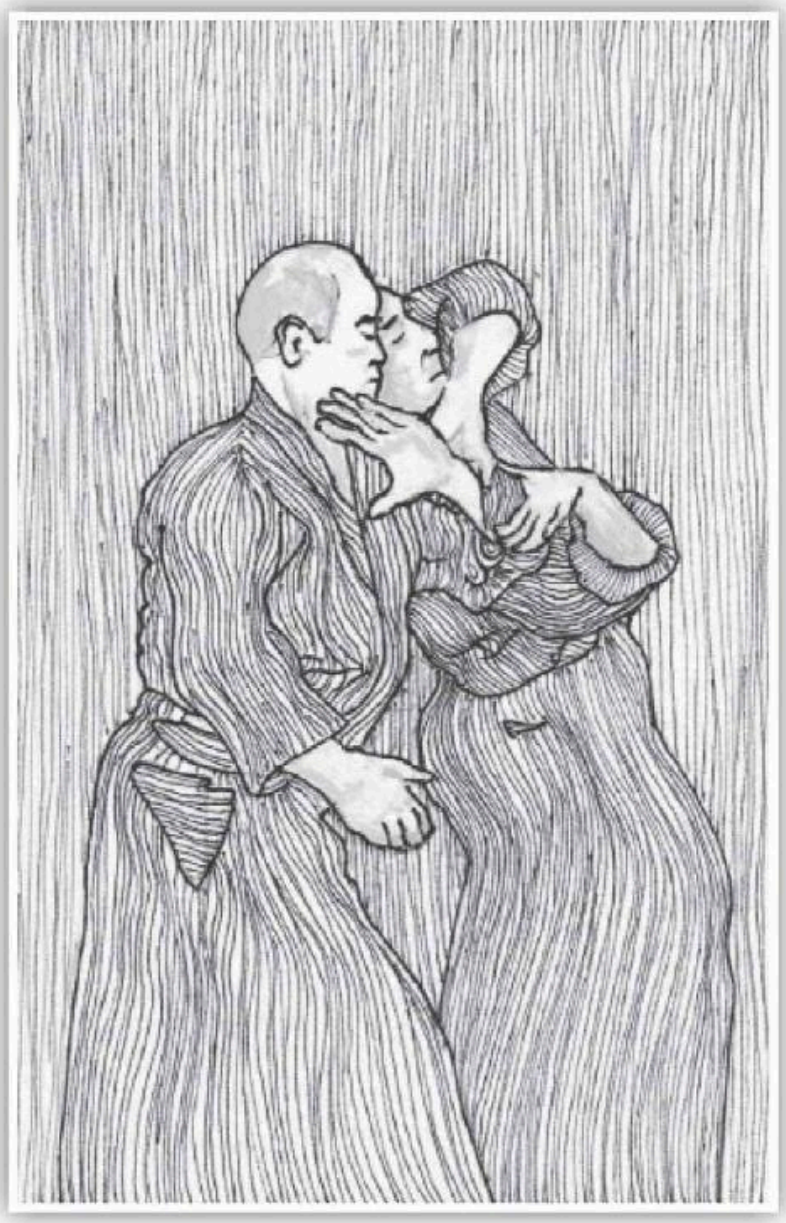
I once received illuminating advice from a senior teacher of our school: "Do exactly what I tell you to do, precisely as I show you, but put into that some sparks of your own." This is a wonderful piece of advice and

illustrates the integration of both forces in our tradition: conformity to the kata and individual self-expression.

Properly performed, the kata allows for ki, the flow of energy. When the flow is interrupted, the practitioner is prone to making two potentially dangerous mistakes: The first mistake stems from the practitioner focusing on the Idea rather than on the gap that lies between the Idea and the reality of his or her skill level. This mistake is most evident with new and very enthusiastic students. They test the effectiveness of the techniques in the local pub and, mostly, receive harsh blows for their efforts. New students fail to grasp the larger picture and enthusiastically jump all over the place in their training. They think they know what to do, so they try to do it but with no regard to the technique, its strength, direction, and speed. Enthusiasm is a positive thing, but aikido requires maturity, time, and patience. Practitioners who are blind to the reality of their skill levels expose themselves to injury.The second mistake is when the practitioner fails to understand the nature of the kata. The kata holds the essence of the art as it is interpreted by each specific school. It provides structure and direction and ensures the modesty of the teacher by linking him to something complete, stable, and bigger than him- or herself. When kata is not internalized by the teacher, the self begins to expand without limits. By not internalizing the kata, instructors let their egos get the better of them in developing training, thus hindering students in their aikido journeys. Years of training without kata lead to losing one's way. Kata is the Way, and in the deepest sense, it is the path connecting the ever-existing with the ultimate becoming. In Chiba Sensei's words in his article "Structure of Shu, Ha, Ri, and Penetration of Shoshin":

> By being exposed to, and trained in, Kata, under a methodology unique to a school (or teacher) for a number of years, one can learn the physical Katas and internal order of energy as well as be penetrated by the heart of the particular school.

I could not agree with him more.



Pencil, marker, and
Gouache on paper
23.3 x 14.8 cm
February 2015

Illustration by Laurence
Mergi Rapoport
www.laulo.com

The Complex Relationship

"He [O-Sensei] never looked back at his followers."

—CHIBA SENSEI

I WILL ALWAYS REMEMBER THE message I received in 2012 from Chiba Sensei. He informed me that my dojo, Birankai Israel, had been formally recognized by the Hombu dojo -Aikido World Headquarters in Japan. The news marked the culmination of a long, tantalizing, and often personal journey begun some eleven years earlier. The news also signaled the possibility of yet another journey and a new and significant chapter in my life.

Not long after learning my dojo had been formally recognized by the Hombu dojo, I contacted each of the shihans who had played a role in this achievement as I wanted to discuss it with them and thank them for the parts they played. While I was generally received with great warmth, one shihan made a comment that left me feeling some unease. He said, "I hope you will keep up with us now that your dojo has gained this recognition." I knew there was some justification for his words as previously, after receiving such recognition, one of our teachers decided to abandon his position as a head of his dojo and left aikido altogether which eventually resulted in the withdrawal of recognition by Hombu Dojo and the dissolution of his dojo. I was intrigued by his remark because it resonated in my mind with a question I had long asked myself. This question had settled

at the core of my relationship with aikido and my decision to make aikido a meaningful part of my daily life—the question of internal obligation. The decision to make aikido central to my life and the question of internal obligation dance together in my mind, through the deep layers and various areas of my life, never leaving me in quiet or at peace with how I meet my obligations to aikido, family, work, and the other areas of my life.

I travel around the world for aikido seminars to meet and study with Japanese teachers, and there is one question I have heard asked of almost every teacher in nearly every seminar: "What do you recommend, Sensei? What should we do in the future to keep improving?" The students all receive different versions of the same short answer: "Keep practicing." For many years I did not understand what those teachers meant. I understood the words but felt I had missed the point. Then I began to think of the answer in a different way, and its meaning became clear to me. I believe their injunction to the students to keep practicing referred to the very root of the obligation to practice aikido. They wanted to make a point about the fundamental obligation to continue practicing aikido along with all the responsibilities that go along with it.

The question of internal obligation is not an abstract idea. It is not just an obligation to one's own thoughts and beliefs. It is an obligation to act, an obligation to practice aikido and everything it entails, mentally and physically, day in and day out. Finally I also understood the remark made to me by the shihan hoping I would keep up after my dojo had gained official recognition. I understood that the shihan was asking me, "Amnon, are you ready to accept the responsibility now bestowed upon you?"

When practicing aikido seriously, one commits to devoting a significant amount of time to practice over the course of his or her life, and it is most likely that periodically significant changes will take place. As I grow older and change, my relationship with aikido also changes. It used to fulfill certain needs, but new needs gradually take their place. The German Jewish philosopher Franz Rosenzweig commented about this phenomenon in the context of two people choosing to marry. He noted that the element of time always remains relevant in the framework of commitment. Two people make sincere vows, but as time passes, what happens when they change and are no longer the same people who stood there and took those vows in their moment of bliss? Can anyone really foresee the future and what changes it may bring? Rosenzweig posits that people tend to disregard future changes,

or rather they see the future as a simple extension of the present. We need to remember that though people change, they still remain responsible for vows made in the past. People change yet still must fulfill their obligations.

Each time I go to the dojo to practice, I reconfirm my commitment to aikido and accept anew the responsibilities inherent in it. I can compare this to my marriage vows, though, of course, there are differences. When I go to the dojo each evening, I leave my family and home, something about which I am often reminded. Balancing my responsibilities and commitments to family, aikido, work, and community is no simple matter, especially when I practice day in and day out year after year. If my personal experience with the dilemma of conflicting commitments is shared by most people who practice aikido, or any other martial art for that matter, then one can begin to understand the depth of the commitment students of aikido make.

As a teacher of aikido for many years, I can say that my main struggle with new students is to convey to them the magnitude of the commitment they are undertaking. It is no wonder that many students, who begin enthusiastically, find the commitment too difficult to maintain and drop out. The dilemma of conflicting commitments and responsibilities is, of course, not limited to the world of martial arts. Against the backdrop of aikido practice demanding such a difficult level of commitment, I would have expected teachers of aikido, or other martial arts, to take exceptional interest in their students. After all, it would seem that if students make such a commitment, if they seek the company of a teacher to continue learning the art, then that teacher should reciprocate and show gratitude to the students. However, traditional teachers of aikido do not do this, which is something I have found intriguing.

In a private conversation, I once asked Chiba Sensei to tell me how his own teacher treated him. Chiba Sensei replied, “O-Sensei did not have any interest in teaching. He did expect his students to stay with him and attend each and every training session. He wanted them to take from him whatever they could take. However, he did not have any aspiration to make them learn.” In other words, O-Sensei had no interest in being an active teacher with passive students. Rather he wanted students by his side who were interested in being active learners.

Many traditional teachers in Japan hold the same attitude toward teaching and learning as O-Sensei. I spoke with one of our Birankai teachers who had studied with Mitsuzuka Sensei, the well-known iaido

teacher, for many years. He told me that when he had first arrived at the dojo, Mitsuzuka Sensei showed him the kata, the entire set of exercises required to become an iaido expert, a body of knowledge that takes years to absorb. Mitsuzuka Sensei then turned to him and said, "I have now shown you what you need to know and so you should now start practicing." From that moment on, until the day he died, the teacher would sit by the tatami, smoke, and talk to his friends. Once in a while, Mitsuzuka Sensei would raise his head, watch his student practice, and say, "No, that is not right." He did not instruct his students. Rather, like O-Sensei, he expected them to become active learners and improve by watching him practice over and over again. In an interview to iSkysport (https://youtu.be/SPeSKlkKPOg) explained Tamura Sensei: "In Japan, the teachers do not explain, they say: if you do not understand by watching, you will not understand by being told."

In the Japanese tradition, martial arts instructors are not focused on teaching but are, in fact, indifferent in this respect. They believe it is not their responsibility to teach but, rather, the student's responsibility to learn. This is very different from the prevalent attitude in the West where we have become accustomed to teachers who have more desire to teach than students do to learn. In general, Western teachers take great care to explain topics and repeat their explanations to make sure the students understand the lessons.

When I first realized how different the Japanese tradition was from my own, I was puzzled. The distinction between teacher and student is sharp and clear in the Japanese tradition. On the one hand, the students are committed to their own paths, but at the same time, they carry some responsibility toward their teachers. They are expected to serve their teachers by taking care of them, carrying their gear, cleaning and managing the dojo, and the like. In doing so the students remain in a constant state of open-mindedness that enables them to absorb what they need from their teachers merely by being in their presence. On the other hand, surprisingly, the teachers remain remote and show little interest in their students. They do not treat them as equals, as individuals with desires and ambitions. I am puzzled by this state of affairs in which both teachers and students seem to treat one another as resources to be exploited. The teachers use their students for income and for labor in maintaining the dojo, while the students use their teachers as resources for knowledge, milking as much

from them as possible. How does a mature individual, with free will, develop under these conditions?

This reminds me of French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre's discussion on the relationship between an individual's consciousness and his or her surroundings. He said that, if left to ourselves, humans are very egocentric beings, and our consciousness gives us the impression that there are no boundaries separating us from the outer world around us; it is all us. Sartre was part of the philosophical school of thought called existentialism, which posits that existence precedes essence; action emerges first. For example, a person does not fight because he is brave; he is brave because he fights. The action emerges first, freely chosen out of all the possible actions of our existence, and, once acted, comes to define us. More importantly the person is always free to redefine himself by a new act.

Sartre posited a theory that I think applies to this unusual dynamic of aikido teacher and student. Each of us sees ourselves subjectively, as subject, and everything not self as the other, or object. When we are newborn infants, we do not realize there is any world outside of self. Everything is subject. As we mature we must distinguish boundaries and learn what is self, or subject, and what is other, or object. In Sartre's theory this process happens via negation, gazing, and alienation. Negation is how one defines oneself, how one sees oneself as separate from the external world. It means that I am everything except for what is not me. In the words of Sartre, "The consciousness is not what it actually is, but what it is not." Gazing is a method of viewing or being in relationship between self and other. It is how we learn what is subject and what is object. Alienation can happen within us when a subject realizes he or she is the object of a judgmental gaze from another. This happening causes people to see themselves as objects rather than solely as subjects. It forces them to recognize that they are not only subjects to themselves but also objects to others, whose gazes see their bodies but not their consciousness. This acknowledgment of having their bodies recognized but not their consciousness can fracture their sense of mind-body unity.

Once I grasp that a person is gazing at me, I discover that there is somebody else present. I recognize the other. It forces me to become more conscious of my world and the facts that I am neither alone in it nor the creator of it. I am, in fact, an entity, or object, among other entities in the world. This can be a blow to our self-focused consciousness, but it is also

enlightening. The act of sensing the gaze from the other causes us to become aware of ourselves. Due to recognition of the other, I have an external world and the freedom to act in it. Recognition of the other creates a world in competition with mine, but it is due to the other that I became conscious of my world, the possibilities in it for me, and the need to battle for it. According to this theory, the opportunity to struggle over regaining mind-body unity, to oppose the alienating gaze, and to act to create ourselves is the ultimate expression of our freedom.

The awareness of being gazed upon means that one understands him- or herself as the unknown object, under unknown scrutiny, usually of a judgmental nature. As mentioned earlier, we define ourselves by acting in the world, and as with any act, we need emotion to propel us. A feeling of shame or pride might help us to recognize the nature of the gaze upon us. We might then surrender or rebel against the judgmental gaze. Deciding to surrender or rebel and then acting upon that decision is an expression of being free, of possessing free will. The conflicts and negations we face, and our struggles to overcome them, characterize the heroic process of becoming an autonomous individual.

Psychological theories, as well as our everyday experiences, teach us that the need for recognition is basic to all human beings, and this definitely applies to teachers and students of aikido. They are both striving for recognition. Sartre's philosophy provides us with an interesting way to view the traditional, complex teacher-student relationships in the realm of the aikido dojo. The student cannot ignore the negating gaze of the teacher, which may cause feelings of alienation. One has to act, to make a conscious decision whether to submit to the gaze that transforms him or her from subject to object. The choice the student makes reveals his or her freedom. The teacher might not be actively teaching lessons as such yet demands that the student clean the dojo, tend the garden, and organize and clean the teacher's restroom. In other words, the teacher treats the student as an object. The student has to decide, again and again, whether to collaborate with this treatment. The decision to consent to the teacher's demands negates and subordinates the student, but the decision is an expression of his or her free will to choose.

However, not only is the student exposed to the gaze of the teacher, but the teacher is also exposed to the gaze of his or her student. It is the gaze of the student that turns the person into the teacher. Without a student there is

no teacher. It is a gaze that reveals to the teacher both the external world and his or her freedom in it.

The student feels the gaze of the teacher threatening to negate his or her subjectivity and turn him or her into an object, and the teacher feels the gaze of the student threatening to do the same thing, to make the teacher an object. The negating gaze is a double-edged sword; both students and teachers are exposed to the threat of fragmentation of their mind-body unity. The student endures the seemingly endless demands from the teacher and from the art he or she represents. Likewise, the teacher faces the exploiting gaze of the student who wants his or her knowledge and experience, as if these are unrelated to the teacher as a subject.

Each of us, student and teacher alike, is aware of the gaze, which awakens within us an introspective process. We are aware that we are judged and, therefore, become an object devoid of our subjective essences. Both teachers and students are exposed to positive and negative judgments from each other. A disapproving gaze may bring shame while an appreciative gaze may bring pride

There is nothing abstract about this response. As much as I have felt pride upon receiving a reassuring gaze, I have also felt shame upon seeing a disapproving one. Speaking for myself, the critical gazes are extremely powerful and more motivating than the reassuring ones. However, I do not wish to argue this from a judgmental point of view. There is no right or wrong here. It is clear to me, though, that a student in a dojo has to develop a way to cope constructively with criticism. We need enough ego strength to withstand the stresses in our lives, both in and outside the world of aikido.

To maintain a meaningful aikido practice for many long years is very difficult. At times the emotional and physical burdens can become too heavy for the teacher or students to sustain. The teacher may lose students and, along with them, a sense of self-worth. The students may lose heart. They might be ill-prepared for how physically and emotionally demanding the practice of aikido turns out to be. This can lead to loss of subjectivity, loss of mind-body unity, sometimes to dehumanization, and eventually to a stale and meaningless practice.

Specific actions are needed in order to give meaning to life. The actions one decides to take, whether teacher or student, will determine whether one will live a truly free and authentic life. If we agree with Sartre’s logic, then the daily battle of the student is quite a crucial one. He

or she has to overcome fatigue, pain, and the negating attitude of the teacher. Yet I propose that this battle stands at the core of becoming an actualized person, a subject with meaning. It also brings us back to internal obligation.

It is no coincidence that a discussion of the relationship between teacher and student has evolved into a discussion of the psychological mechanisms that help us develop, become stronger, and become better able to cope with the world. This is fundamental for aikido as a traditional Japanese martial art. Personal growth, transformation, and character development are integral parts of the art of aikido, and they are achieved through honoring one's internal obligation to keep practicing and to keep seeking.

Warrior Awareness

"Aikido expresses the unification of body arts and weapons training, both philosophically and physically."

—CHIBA SENSEI

I AM AN AIKIDO INSTRUCTOR and have been for over twenty years. When new students approach me and ask to join my class, I first ask them to sit and watch a class and then, after they feel like they know what aikido is about, start practicing. It would be impossible not to notice what a small percentage of people want to continue to practice with me after first watching a class. In many cases, after watching a class, their response is some version of "It is very interesting but it is frightening to me." In general, the people who respond this way do not return. However, as I also encounter similar responses from other practitioners of aikido who come to practice with us at my dojo, it is reasonable to assume the issue is not with the students but with us. There is something in the way we practice aikido that causes uneasiness in both potential students and practitioners from different schools of aikido. While all aikido schools teach such values as harmony, soft motion, cooperation, and intention, the tenets of aikido are subject to the interpretations of the teachers of each school. What makes one school different from another? Or, specifically, what distinguishes Birankai, my aikido school, from other schools?

There is no clear and obvious answer. In a sense it is a question impossible to answer as the essence of Birankai aikido is embedded in the bodies of us practitioners, existing in the deep layers of our bodily identities, layers that are not easily accessible to others outside of a particular school of aikido. Transmission of this knowledge is problematic, as it is a physical bodily knowing, not a language-based knowing that can easily be transmitted via written or spoken word. Moreover, in principle, it is impossible to transmit the essential elements of our experiences and perspectives on life to those people who do not have the "aikido vibration" in their flesh and blood. In other words, verbalized articulation of the aikido experience is inherently paradoxical. This knowledge might well be obvious to practitioners, yet remote and almost mysterious to outsiders.

Chiba Sensei has long pointed out the importance of mind-body unity. However, as Birankai aikido is a bodily, language-free knowing, too much verbalization and rationalization interfere with learning and distance people from connecting with and developing their inner potential. So if accurate transmission of the experience of aikido is inherently impossible via words and language often obstructs the path to connectedness with one's innermost being, why try to verbalize at all? In other words, why write a book? The answer I give is this: It is important for the disciples of any school of aikido to understand the perspectives, values, and tenets that are encompassed in their practice and unique to their particular school or type of aikido. In addition I have been practicing and teaching aikido for many years and want to share my personal journey hopefully to help pave the pathway for others. To accomplish these goals, I need to offer definitions, explanations, and examples as well as make distinctions, so, however inadequate, language is necessary. This answer I provide is by no means a formal one. It is a personal one and represents only my own conviction.

What makes our school of aikido what it is? To begin with, let us turn to Chiba Sensei, who emphasized the three elements that stand at the core of aikido—elements he never ceased to stress. These elements construct the martial attitude, or warrior awareness, of aikido: timing (when to move), location (where to move), and response (what to do). In his article "The Study and Refinement of Martial Awareness," he writes:

> I would like to offer my observations of Aikido in contemporary society. However much of a practitioner's technique may appear splendid and well performed, in the absence of the three aforementioned elements (when, where, and what), I consider what s/he is doing to represent somewhat of departure from *martial* aspect of Aikido. I can appreciate the skill and accumulated efforts behind the movements; however, they appear to me like a fascinating display of a human swimming on dry land.

It is clear that for Chiba Sensei, and hence for the aikido school he created, the martial, or warrior, aspect of the art is essential.

For me Chiba Sensei's words are most important as a challenge toward our understanding of ourselves as his disciples. As I suggested above, reduction or translation of Chiba Sensei's truth to ordinary modes of communication brings serious difficulties. To begin with, he is harshly critical, not only of current culture in the West but also of today's numerous aikido schools of practice. What is lacking is martial, or warrior, awareness.

As suggested above, it is difficult to analyze and explain the meaning of warrior awareness in our practice and experience. It is the presence of a mood, of a positive alertness, of an openness in situations of danger or immediate challenge. It is subtle and deep and buried in the unfathomable unity of our bodies and souls, a place beyond the normal levels of psychological and physical unity. The psychological dimension of warrior awareness is complex, but it is somewhat easier to comprehend the physical side of the experience.

Aikido is inherently dangerous. The weapons we use and movements we make when practicing are real, and the risk of injury is always present. To practice aikido with martial awareness means experiencing fear. In our constant effort to face and overcome fear, we continue to practice and seek out the limitations of body and soul. This search empowers the process of practicing aikido. It turns each of us into a better aikidoka and eventually helps one to become a better and more courageous person. This process is at the heart of the school's perception of the transformational journey that develops a novice practitioner of aikido into a teacher and a teacher-cum-disciple. Therefore, one of the characteristics of Birankai aikido is the importance placed upon recognizing danger and using our response to it for

personal growth. One of my favorite quotes about danger and courage is Plato's beautiful reference to the courage and greatness implied in the effort to know:

> Socrates: and I, Meno, like what I am saying. Some things I have said of which I am not altogether confident. But that we shall be better and braver and less helpless if we think that we ought to enquire, than we should have been if we indulged in the idle fancy that there was no knowing and no use in seeking to know what we do not know; that is a theme upon which I am ready to fight, in word and deed, to the utmost of my power.

We seek to know ourselves as practitioners of Birankai aikido, distinguished from other branches of aikido. About this Chiba Sensei said, "I regard Aikido to be more than just another martial art form, for its value transcends the boundaries and limitations inherent in the martial art form." Chiba Sensei posits that seemingly perfect practice and form are not perfect at all, and what seems like smooth, elegant, and perfect technical form might be far from satisfactory, far from something to which we should aspire. It might lack martial awareness and be what he called "swimming on dry land."

We live in a modern world that tends to allow us to minimize our perceptions of the potential dangers around us until they are hardly detectable at all. Hence warrior awareness is virtually unknown. Our school of aikido is about the resurrection of the attitude of alertness and consciousness of danger as well as an attitude of harmony. It is the resurrection of memory deeply buried in our innermost identity. Reconnecting with this memory is what we do in our practice. The cultivation of this attitude, this warrior awareness, as I understand it, is the essence of our school of aikido.

Danger

"If you dare to attack me, prepare to die."

—CHIBA SENSEI

SOME TIME AGO WHILE PRACTICING aikido with Chris Mooney Sensei in Uzes, France, I experienced an alarming, yet meaningful, moment of the danger and risk inherent in practicing within our school of aikido. Mooney Sensei attacked me with a *tanto* (knife), moving forward forcefully and ferociously. I reacted as quickly as I could, but my heavy *gi*, which trailed out behind me, was stabbed through and through. The hole was startlingly big. If I had not moved so quickly, if I had reacted a little bit late, I would have been very seriously injured. Mooney Sensei smiled and said, "Every time you wear this gi, you will remember."

I continued to think about that moment. I dwelled on it, feeling the weight of the danger and my near miss with serious injury. As time passed the experience became even more meaningful, bringing home to me the essence and philosophy of our aikido school: the danger is necessary. We train our disciples and students to be aware of the dangers inherent in aikido and defend themselves against it. We practice with real weapons, and we aim at the bodies or heads of our opponents. It is dangerous. This is an exciting characteristic of aikido.

Chiba Sensei asserted in his article "Aikidoists Beware:"

> The martial art (budo) is truly a frightening thing… martial art is back-to-back with death…If we were to find the unchangeable ethic in our Japanese budo, its source should be found in the relative balance of tension between life and death and between the self and others.

Danger, according to Chiba Sensei, is not an incidental aspect of aikido but rather an essential component of our practice. Without danger aikido, or any other martial art, is not worthy of the title "martial art."

Many practitioners of aikido think that O-Sensei invented a new martial art, a system different from the traditional Japanese martial arts such as judo, karate, or jujitsu. What O-Sensei developed, though, is not a new martial art but a new way for developing human potential within the context of traditional martial arts, facilitating development in a much more harmonious manner. What this means in practical terms for the martial art is that it is concerned with using minimal movement to deliver the minimal necessary violence to effect maximum protection both for the self and opponent. Yet O-Sensei's path to human development via martial arts still incorporates the spirit of traditional Japanese martial arts. As Chiba Sensei explains, the transcendence of Aikido from the traditional martial arts as a new way of personal development does not mean it ceases to be a martial art, just as it is impossible for humans to stop being human or conversely to assert that their existence has been nonhuman.

The word "aikido" is composed of three Japanese words put together to describe the martial art. *Ai* means harmony, *ki* means spirit or energy, and *do* means the manner or the way. Put together, "aikido" means a system to harmonize energy. Aikido is a martial art designed for harmony. In martial arts harmony and conflict are not a dichotomy but rather are complementary. So is the aikido universe. It is complex, deep, and paradoxical.

What is the phenomenology of danger underlying the experience of aikido? Why do we expose ourselves to it? The coexistence of life and death certainly generates excitement of unprecedented intensity. It energizes personal development, checks feelings of depression and confusion, and pushes us to the furthermost reaches of our capabilities and endurance. But there is another reason we expose ourselves to danger that goes past

excitement and challenge. French Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas theorizes that the presence of real danger presents an invaluable opportunity and occasion for experiencing psychophysical unity.

In his work, "Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism," Levinas theorizes that in the presence of the ultimate aggression, humanity reveals itself through the adherence of the body and mind:

> The body is not only a happy or unhappy accident that relates us to the implacable world of matter. Its adherence to the Self is of value in itself. It is an adherence that one does not escape and that no metaphor can confuse with the presence of an external object; it is a union that does not in any way alter the tragic character of finality.

As practitioners of aikido via the Birankai school, we know firsthand about this unity through our mere glimpses of the much desired union between our own bodies and souls. The discipline and experience of our aikido practice, lead us to sense the gaps between our present incomplete condition and the Ideal of total body-soul unity. Awareness of the gap intensifies our motivation to improve and grow, to close the gap. As Chiba Sensei says in his article "Discovering the Body:"

> Recognition of an imbalance, disharmony, or disorder within one's system, sensed within the body, as well as between the body and consciousness, is a starting point for growth. One might characterize the development of this recognition as a conversation or dialogue which occurs between one's body and one's consciousness. As the dialogue develops, awareness becomes clearer, and one begins to perceive the natural power or potential ability which has, until then, been hidden.

Increased motivation to practice aikido in order to experience a greater sense of body-soul unity translates to an increased willingness to risk the dangers involved.

Friedrich Nietzsche, a nineteenth century German philosopher, explains the meaning and value of sheer danger as opposed to mere survival this way:

> Mankind is a rope between animal and overman—a rope over an abyss. A dangerous crossing, a dangerous on-the-way, a dangerous looking back, a dangerous shuddering and standing still. What is great about human beings is that they are crossing over and going under. I love those who do not know how to live unless by going under, for they are the ones who cross over.

The "overman" to which Nietzsche refers is a man who creates his own values, who dares to take risks in order to develop and grow.

As practitioners of Birankai aikido, our position on the value of intense danger is not entirely different from that of Nietzsche's overman. We struggle to become better and more individual human beings, gradually reaching toward development and transformation by taking risks in our daily practice as we expose ourselves to danger and pain and face fear and anxiety. Some of us cherish the opportunity lying in danger, but not all feel the same way.

I think we should become aware of the value of danger but also wary of fascination with danger. We should become aware of the dangers in danger. There is a psychological risk of dissociation under circumstances of imminent threat to the unity of body and soul. As much as danger in our practice of aikido is an opportunity for growth toward body-soul unity, danger can also create a schism between spirit and body. This can be seen in practitioners who master the techniques of martial arts but lack the true warrior spirit underlying the quest for unity of body and soul. Hence, rather than being used as an opportunity for development toward unity, danger can bring about a split between body and soul. Those masters of technique who lack spirit are without aikido souls or an authentic sense of aikido value as they have lost connection with very valuable aspects of their humanity. They have missed the essential lesson of aikido, which is a search for wholeness. They are competent yet shallow. This danger in danger, namely of becoming an aikido body without an aikido soul, is rooted in the essence of the practice, or malpractice, of aikido as well as all other martial arts.

Another risk in danger is the withdrawal of the body from the mind-body connection. This may cause us to lack the ability to master our bodies in the needed moment, to be unable to make them work when facing danger. In the Olympic Games in Beijing, the Israeli master of judo, Arik Ze'evi, was knocked out of the tournament in the first round. He said, the media (sport.walla.co.il) report, "It was my worst scenario. I did not even think that I would lose in less than minute." Ze'evi's body was not there for him and under his control in the crucial moment. He knew what he needed to do, but his body did not respond to his mind. He failed to unite body and soul. The way I understand it, Arik Ze'evi's experience illustrates one of the consequences of a split between mind and body, which leaves us less than we are capable of being.

An injury to the body will heal in time, but a schism between body and soul, at its extreme, amounts to a betrayal of what it means to be human. Strengthening and solidifying body-soul unity form the core of the practice of aikido.

Birankai aikido, practiced with the right attitude, is a controlled and disciplined martial art serving the quest for wholeness of body and soul. Danger can provide an immeasurable opportunity for movement toward this union. But even so, a dedicated aikido practitioner never tires of heeding the danger in danger, ensuring no hindrance to body-soul unification.

Pencil and marker on paper
16.7 x 16 cm
February 2, 2015

Illustration by Laurence MergiRapoport
www.laulo.com

On Becoming Grand Master

"It is a great loss to the Aikido community if we lose the accumulated experience and knowledge of these [old] people."

—CHIBA SENSEI

One rainy day in December 2013, I attended a special event at the concert hall of Tel Aviv University Music Academy. The event was a master class instructed by the famous pianist András Schiff. While I was already familiar with András Schiff as an artist, this was the first time I had the opportunity to watch him teach and interact with students. The experience was a compelling one. Several students played classic piano pieces, and Schiff commented on their work. What drew my attention more than anything else were the instances when he, himself, played the pieces. When I closed my eyes, I could instantly recognize who was playing. There was not even the slightest doubt who was the teacher and who was the student. There was a magical quality to the music when his fingers touched the keys. For a moment the piano echoed the sounds of string or wind instruments as if from another world, a world far removed from the sounds produced by the students.

No less interesting was the response of the students to his playing and teaching. Schiff dedicated an hour to each student, and at the onset of each lesson, the student was tense or even anxious. However, as the hour progressed, each one seemed to internalize the lesson provided by Schiff.

All of a sudden, a student would humbly smile out of relief, gratitude, or both, as the student finally understood his message, the lesson he was teaching. By the time I left the concert hall, I felt I had received a very special gift, one that exceeded my expectations by far. I realized that András Schiff was nothing less than a grand master and a very gifted one.

That experience made me begin to wonder what separates a master from one who deserves to be called a grand master. Witnessing the musical grand master at work shook my senses to the core and reminded me of another time I contemplated the question of what defines a grand master. My mind took me back many years to when I first came across Chiba Sensei. I can easily recall the first time I met him on the tatami in 2002. His presence could be felt in the building even before he entered the dojo. Once he entered the dojo, took the tatami, and began to move, I was amazed. I believe my emotional response at the time was characteristic of the typical response one has to an encounter with a grand master—a grand master of any kind of profession or craft.

By the time I first joined Birankai International, Chiba Sensei was no longer a young man. One of my friends who knew him in his younger years said to me, "I wish you had known him when he was younger, though he is still pretty impressive." That comment led me to search for video clips of young Chiba, and I became captivated by his technique, power, and elegance. His movements were entrancing, so soft and yet so focused. However, once I saw him practice aikido in person, I was struck by the difference. He might not have been as fast and showy as he was in his younger years, but to me he was much more impressive. Even his most simple and basic movements had an aura of perfection. Without a doubt I knew I was watching a grand master. I could see no resemblance between him and the other teachers I had watched, some who were much younger than he at the time. Chiba Sensei was mature. He was ripe. It was as if all his years of training were geared toward the masterful completion of each and every movement he made. As I saw it, Chiba Sensei had managed to build his own language in movement—a simpler, more compact, more eloquent language. He no longer needed to be flashy, so to speak. As it seemed to me, his criteria for the quality of his practice were no longer external.

Today there are many students calling their teachers grand masters, and some of the grand master teachers are relatively young. The way I see it,

there is a contradiction in being a young grand master. To become a grand master requires many years in the field, intensive practice, and the development of some unique abilities. Young teachers, even the best young teachers, still need to master and embody complex techniques. They need to learn to masterfully speak the language of their field, in this case, aikido. They need renown, which comes as a result of years of practice and peer recognition of the brilliance of their work. Grand masters, in a way, embody the opposite of this. Grand masters take the complexity and distill it to its elegant essence. In order to do this, they develop a new language. In aikido this new language is related to movement and expressed with the body. Contained within the simplicity of this new language is the complexity of all that came before it.

Here I am discussing the process of becoming a grand master in any field that allows for the development of idiosyncratic style. I want to borrow from the ideas of Alexander Grothendieck, a Jewish mathematician who, in some ways, changed the face of his profession in the 1960s and 1970s.

Mathematicians solve problems. They tear apart the problem with the best tools they have at their disposal while striving to reach the most elegant solution, one that uses the most compact procedure. Alexander Grothendieck challenged the ideal of elegant solution by describing two problem-solving styles in mathematics. Referring to the first style, he said:

> If you think of a theorem to be proved as a nut to be opened, so as to reach "the nourishing flesh protected by the shell," then the hammer and chisel principle is: "put the cutting edge of the chisel against the shell and strike hard. If needed, begin again at many different points until the shell cracks—and you are satisfied.

Referring to the second style of problem solving, he said:

> I can illustrate the second approach with the same image of a nut to be opened. The first analogy that came to my mind is of immersing the nut in some softening liquid, and why not simply

> water? From time to time you rub so the liquid penetrates better, and otherwise you let time pass.
>
> The shell becomes more flexible through weeks and months—when the time is ripe, hand pressure is enough; the shell opens like a perfectly ripened avocado!
>
> A different image came to me a few weeks ago. The unknown thing to be known appeared to me as some stretch of earth or hard marl, resisting penetration…The sea advances insensibly in silence, nothing seems to happen, nothing moves, the water is so far off you hardly hear it…yet it finally surrounds the resistant substance.

Grothendieck said that one should not try to prove anything that is not almost obvious. This statement does not mean one should not be ambitious in choosing on what to work. Arthur Ognus of the University of California at Berkley explained Grothendieck's statement to mean the following: "If you don't see that what you are working on is almost obvious, then you are not ready to work on that yet. Prepare the way. And that was his approach to mathematics, that everything should be so natural that it just seems completely straightforward."

Deligne described a characteristic Grothendieck proof (solution) as a long series of trivial steps where "nothing seems to happen and yet at the end a highly nontrivial theorem is there."

This process is what makes a grand master. He or she has developed an original style, a singularly unique language that allows him or her to find a way forward. The grand master's craft comes naturally to him or her, and problems shared by other professionals are absent from this newly created world. This is also why many grand masters feel lonely. He or she might wish that others could utilize his or her language, but all too often they cannot. At least they cannot understand until they have undertaken their own journeys and developed to a point where such understanding becomes possible.

For the moment let us view language the most common way, that is as rules that follow practices or behaviors, sort of a bottom-up approach where smaller bits are pieced together resulting in a larger and more complex whole. This language can also be applied to physical movement. First, one makes a movement that comes naturally, and then, after the movement is completed, the idea of verbalizing the process, or attaching words to it, comes to mind. To master a language, or any other skill, means the speaker has internalized the rules following the behaviors to a high and creative degree. In other words, he or she has put together the many small pieces of a language, resulting in mastery of the whole language itself. People who attain this high level of competence are called masters.

Yet there is a different possibility; that of developing a new language out of an already existing one. This comes about when someone who has mastered a language begins to see its deficiencies, recognizes the need for a new set of rules or concepts to solve the problems at hand, and begins to develop or adapt the language to better communicate and meet the need. This development can take a long time. It is a private process, and it is not always obvious to the master himself, that it is taking place. When this new language derived from the old language becomes evident to the master and he or she is able to externalize it, the master becomes a grand master. In time he or she can begin teaching others the new language, and these students and disciples can develop a new, enhanced, or deeper understanding or vision of the discipline, whether it is aikido, music, art, math, or nearly any other field that allows for creative freedom and unique perspectives.

In aikido there is certainly a visual dimension to the special qualities of a grand master's movement. Students can see how he or she moves, but there is also a hidden dimension of depth and meaning to the motion that is not readily visible. If there were merely a mechanical quality to these movements, then it would be a simple matter for some students to follow and quickly imitate. However, imitation is completely out of the question because it is devoid of the hidden layers of depth and understanding inherent to the grand master's language.

Contemporary studies provide evidence of the interaction between language, one's perceptions, and reality. Lera Boroditsky, from Stanford University, summarized the connection between language and the shape of reality by stating, "Research in my lab and in many others has been

uncovering how language shapes even the most fundamental dimensions of human experience: space, time, causality and relationship to others." These studies, as well as many others, support my assertion that the language the grand master creates, builds a new understanding of the field.

There is no doubt in my mind that in the aikido world I know, mainly Birankai International, there are masters. Birankai shihans, or master teachers, definitely deserve the title bestowed upon them. Yet in my humble opinion, there is only one grand master, and that is Chiba Sensei. Hence I disagree with the opinion stated earlier that Chiba Sensei is less impressive now than in his younger years. My own deep conviction is that he underwent a lengthy process on the path to becoming a grand master, a process in which he gradually developed a new language, one that was completely his own.

When a master is developing and transforming into a grand master, it may appear at times as if little is happening, as if little forward movement is taking place. Then a new language of movement emerges, one with special qualities related to its depth and vision and understanding.

What I am saying might seem somewhat vague as many cannot grasp the special qualities of the new language. However, there is a way to catch a glimpse of the outcomes of these qualities. It is called the aha effect, or eureka effect. To explain, let me return for a moment to the musician András Schiff and to the broad smiles of relief, or perhaps sheer joy, that I saw spread on the faces of his students. The aha or eureka effect refers to the common human experience of suddenly understanding a previously incomprehensible problem or concept. The personal language grand master András Schiff developed allowed him to decipher and communicate the various difficulties preventing each student from moving ahead—even when the students themselves could not identify the problems standing in their way—allowing them to suddenly understand, see the issues in a new light, and progress. Even very minute changes in understanding can make a huge difference, and then each student's entire interpretation and understanding undergoes an incredible transformation.

We have been discussing the grand master's ability to see things outside of the box, to develop a special and unique language to encompass this knowing, and then to embody and externalize the language for the benefit of his or her students. But are there more ways in which grand masters are different from others? Research has shown us that some people

are capable of effectively using human echolocation, the sonar-like skill bats use to navigate. We also know some animals sense the electromagnetic field and use it, for instance, to navigate during migration, and one study (Floey, E., Lauren, Gegear, J., Robert, Reppert, M., Steven) found that a protein in the human eye, when placed in fruit flies, has the ability to detect magnetic fields. Whether humans have the ability to use the protein to detect magnetic fields is unknown, but the study prompted Steven Reppert of the University of Massachusetts Medical School to tell LiveScience (livescience.com, June 21, 2011), "It poses the question, 'maybe we should rethink about this sixth sense.'" I am not suggesting that grand masters have superhuman sensing capabilities, but that, perhaps in one or more areas, they can access more of what is possible for human beings to sense and integrate that extra sensing ability with their skill.

Let us return to the world of aikido and the ability of aikido grand masters to decipher the inhibitions that block their students. Once we understand that the hatching of grand master is an unexpected event, in some ways and the new changes that appeared out of nowhere, might face rigidity within their students. They have to identify the difficulties their students face as well as the potentials concealed inside and seeking a way out. At the risk of repeating myself, I want to stress that some students might be incapable, for a variety of reasons, of receiving what the grand master offers to them. The transmission of the grand master's knowing takes two, and the students have to be open, like an empty vessel that has not yet adapted its shape to the substance that will eventually fill its space.

The paradox here is that the students who have difficulty accepting what the grand master offers, cannot, by any means be described as empty. After years of practice, some students are filled with perceptions, understandings, and ideas that have developed, consciously or unconsciously, along the way, and have become cemented in their minds and bodies. They are unable to shake loose and open themselves to new and different information. Their judgment has been impaired, and most are not even aware of the glasses they wear and through which they see and judge their experiences. Some students will be able to reach a level of emotional and/or cognitive maturity and openness that allows them to make the crucial adaptation resulting in their improvement. But unfortunately, some students will not, and their development, their ability to grasp that unique gift offered by the grand master, might forever be blocked.

One can aspire to become a master. This is a perfectly legitimate goal, and there are clear paths to follow and criteria by which to judge whether one has reached that stage. However, there is no script for becoming a grand master. Common knowledge would suggest a grand master has to be extremely talented, and that is certainly true. But no amount of talent alone will create a grand master. There is no way to tell who is on his or her way to becoming a grand master as the road to reaching that stage has no clear external manifestations. We generally have no contact with a future grand master's private language during its formation. It is only after many years of deepening understanding and transformation, resulting in the development of a new personal and unique language, that passage to the status of grand master occurs. In many cases we respond to the qualities of a grand master with amazement, even with a sense of spiritual elation. We instinctively know that what we experience with them is unique. It is this feeling that turns students into disciples ready to follow their teacher. The mission of grand masters (using Arthur Ognus words) is to prepare the way for future generations who will follow in their footsteps.

In a way, grand masters are non-mythical unicorns; they embody all we strive for in ourselves and in our chosen fields.

Heart-to-Heart

"Like water flowing from a higher e elevation to a pool below."

—CHIBA SENSEI

AIKIDO IS A VISUALLY FASCINATING martial art with practitioners moving through the kata with strong yet soft and graceful fluid movements. However, there is much more to teaching, learning, and practicing aikido than meets the eye. The expectation that a person practicing martial arts will not only learn technical expertise but will also undergo concurrent psychological change is not unique to aikido, though we assume that there are deeper levels in this particular practice. There are thoughts, beliefs, and experiences existing within our depths that need to be deciphered and come to the forefront. There are aikido attitudes and values as well as aikido heart, mind, and spirit that need to be passed from the teacher and absorbed by the student. There is personal growth and transformation that must take place. The visible movements made by practitioners of aikido have subjective meaning that leads to personal growth and transformation. Guiding this process presents a challenge to teachers of aikido as most of it is internal and not readily visible to us. How do we know what our students are experiencing, and how do we communicate with them about it?

I suggest this challenge is most successfully met through direct contact between student and teacher over a long period of time, which allows the necessary information to be encapsulated and exchanged and

transformation to occur. But how does this happen? What actually occurs in this process of transformation? What are the specific and unique traits of the martial arts that promote personal change? That is the topic of this chapter: the development and growth of the practitioner as a human being. We are not talking about acquiring technical proficiency here. Proficiency is an important element, but there is a danger the student will become too proficient, too technical, without concurrently developing an authentic aikido personality, one that is independent, mature, and stable.

Here I am referring to serious students of aikido, trainees who have sustained many years of practice. While a person naturally changes as the years pass, maturing within the practice of aikido offers enhanced opportunities for personal growth. The process to which I am referring, while not openly visible, is not hidden from the eyes of senior aikido teachers, who focus on such transformations because outward signs of them can be so subtle. While it is taken for granted that this transformational process occurs, teachers often find it difficult to spell out for their students, especially because written and verbal language do not play a significant role in the practice of aikido.

Martial arts are about movement, and words do not play a major role in any one of them, especially aikido. Aikido is, first and foremost, based upon communicating information through movement. In aikido the words utilized during instruction are minimal as words only negligibly add to the process of learning. I dare say that few pursuits match the martial arts when it comes to lack of talking. So how can the teacher transmit vast amounts of information, the knowledge of how to conduct oneself moving through time and space and reacting to the movements of others, with only a few words uttered?

To better understand, the special relationship between an aikido teacher and his or her disciple can be viewed as parallel to the relationship between parent and child. Chiba Sensei coined the term “heart to heart transmission” to describe this very intimate web of relationships. In his article “The Study and Refinement of Martial Awareness,” he wrote that the heart-to-heart transmission is known in Japanese as *I shin den shin*. He translated:

I—by or through
Shin—heart, mind, spirit
Den—to communicate, pass on, or transmit
Shin—heart, mind, spirit

Taken as a whole, the phrase means to communicate or pass something on from one to another, from the heart of the giver to the heart of the receiver, without reliance on words. It's bringing up once again the question of what is transmitted and how.

Remember, aikido is different from other martial arts because the goal is not to win, to destroy the attacker, but rather to protect oneself from injury while, as much as safely possible, also protecting the attacker from harm. What lies at the very core of aikido is a personal challenge to the practitioner as it presupposes that one can encounter very aggressive energies, energies with devastating potential, and emerge unharmed because the individual is equipped with a mature personality.

Kimusubi means to unify or become one with an opponent through the mind or ki, or to establish contact through consciousness before physical contact occurs. Kimusubi is essential to the art of aikido, and it is a key concept in understanding the way in which subjectivity, or the sense of self unique to each human being, is developed via aikido training. Specific thoughts and ideas are communicative; they lend themselves to conceptualizations and verbalizations. We speak about them. On the other hand, the absence of words reveals to us the nature, or the essence, of aikido practice. As teachers we have to find a way to convey this essence that emerges and reveals itself through aikido movement. What is unique in the kind of movement produced in aikido, and what is it about that movement that facilitates emotional growth? Kimusubi demands that one blend with the aggressor. The attacker and the aikido practitioner are, in more than one sense, a very special kind of couple, a fact that bears enormous ramifications to our discussion.

Daniel Stern was a psychoanalyst who explored the subject of mental movement (having a thought or feeling an emotion) and physical action, particularly as it relates to the reciprocal relationship between baby and mother. He posited that there is a vital experience of life, one that lies at the heart of emotional development. Stern also introduced the idea of affect attunement, which is a matching in type or form of one person's vitality to that of another person and is exemplified by the mother using her own behavior to match the vitality form of her upset baby, effectively enabling the baby to calm and settle back to contentment. The baby learns how to relate to another human being through this bodily contact. Stern described

this process of learning as one that is both unconscious and nonverbal, a sort of implicit relational knowing.

The process of identifying another person is based on vitality form matching—recognizing, remembering, and internalizing the unique vitality characteristic of each person, a sort of vitality fingerprint. This attentiveness to others and the process of internalizing their unique vitality signature eventually forms a connectedness whereby one person is able to share, without words, some intimate experiences.

The insights provided by Stern, especially those related to the dynamic experiences in different stages of life and vitality, have influenced my understanding of the power for transformation held in the nonverbal movement of aikido. By "dynamic" I am referring to physical motion, movement that takes shape in both time and space and has traits of force and directionality. "Vitality" is defined as the force or power manifested by all living things and is experienced in one's own movements and the movements of others. Vitality, present at the very start of life, before the acquisition of language, is woven in with movement as an inseparable feature of life. The vitality of each person is unique and carries with it the matchless imprint of that person. Hence we are able to recognize the nature of the vitality that is characteristic of each of the people close to us. We are able to recognize a person via their vitality, their life force.

Margaret Mahler, another psychoanalyst, developed the separation-individuation model to describe the process of developing an identity or sense of self. The model is developmental, meaning one progresses from one stage to the next, beginning with symbiotic attachment—the stage where one's identity has not yet been formed, such as in an infant who does not recognize him or herself as separate from the mother—and advancing to a more mature stage that enables the child to be relatively independent. In the final stage of separation-individuation, the person manages to establish a distinct identity of his or her own, separate from the parent or parental figure. In other words, one's identity relies on the person to whom he or she has attached.

In the beginning of life, this other person is usually the mother. However, the person to whom one is attached is not always the mother, and this stage of development is not always successfully resolved in the first years of one's life. But there are recurrent opportunities for resolution of this stage as we continue to develop and refine ourselves many years into

adulthood. We might draw others into this process when needed. We choose, consciously or unconsciously, that person with whom we will identify. This person with whom we identify must have increased value to us because of who they are to us, either in reality or imagination, and the value is built up over time and through multiple shared experiences. That person must have a special relationship with us, and we attribute parent-like emotional traits to him or her. Whether it happens in the first few years of life or much later, the process is the same. We all learn via internalization how to be someone else in the process of learning how to be ourselves. Stern, in his book posed the question, "How do they [the people we identified with] become internalized?" And he answered, "It is their forms of vitality as these relate to specific action, feelings, attitude, reaction, and how they respond to us and make us feel that are internalized and identified with…It is the interactive experience that is internalized."

Forms of vitality shape and build our psyches and are linked to an intimate relationship that is not only unique but also characterized by behavior and being almost devoid of a verbal language dimension. This unique communication is made up of four components related to motion—those of force, time, space, and direction—which, taken all together, give rise to the experience of vitality in one's own movements and in the movements of others. These components establish the primal interaction of a child with a significant other, and they correspond with those that are also essential to the relationship between the traditional aikido teacher, as Chiba Sensei has aptly described, and his or her student. In other words, the components above are part and parcel of the heart-to-heart transmission.

The great masters of aikido have regarded the art both as a tool to achieve personal development and as an opportunity to internalize higher values. They intuitively felt and understood that this process actually takes place in real life. While it may not happen every time, the possibility for this growth in aikido is always there.

Aikido as a martial art creates an environment where the option for transformation is always present as it sustains conditions that support personal growth. First, the art is based upon forms of vitality, that is, on movement in time and space with clear direction and force. This aspect is common to all martial arts, but aikido is endowed with additional features not found in other martial arts. Aikido is also based on the principle of kimusubi, the ability to immerse with the aggressor. It is only in aikido

where one intentionally matches his own form of vitality with that of the aggressor. Heart-to-heart is the unique and intimate relationship between aikido teacher and students. These relationships reflect several emotional elements not essentially different from those that typify the relationship of one with his or her parent. Whether they are aware of it, students of the various martial arts are, in fact, associating the relationship they have with the master with the relationships they have with a parent.

What is so unique to aikido is that the relationship between student and teacher is mutual. Chiba Sensei introduced the idea of mutuality and closeness between martial arts teacher and student, which delivers a sense of exclusiveness and a valuable emotional connection to the student. This mutuality plays a crucial role in crystalizing self-identity via identification with the teacher. But this is not by any means a simple task, particularly when words play such a small role in the interaction between the master and his or her disciple. Chiba Sensei himself refers to this element in the relationship and notes that the process must occur in a natural manner, like water flowing from a higher elevation to a pool below.

The psychoanalytic theory presented by Daniel Stern fits perfectly to the needs of aikido teachers. It points to a special internalization process based on intimate relationships. The student identifies with his or her teacher and, first and foremost, internalizes the teacher's vitality as well as the energy, power, force, and direction of the teacher's movement. As teachers, we reference the rule of thumb "when, where, and what" when helping students achieve the right timing, direction, and technique to use in meeting an attack. A need for verbal instructions might suggest a weakness in our teaching approach. It is easy to talk, but cognitive understanding has nothing to do with martial, or warrior, knowledge, as such knowledge must be transmitted via the meeting of two bodies. Nothing can replace the actual movement, its immediacy, its feel. This is, in fact, the master's form of vitality. The concept of kimusubi, so typical to aikido, is just about that, the merging of the master's form of vitality with that of the trainee who is attacking him or her. Many students take pride in moving just like their teacher. At times they even imitate the external gestures of the teacher such as a facial expression, behavior, manner of speech, and so forth. Yet this is just the beginning of the process, and both master and student face a much greater task, as eventually in the process, they must separate and become independent of each other. Eventually the student has to find his own

unique and personal identity, his own form of vitality, which is always different from that of any other person. He must mature and complete the process.

I believe that the developmental concepts of separation-individuation and vitality provide an answer to a riddle always facing aikido teachers. The vast majority of teachers regard aikido as a road to self-improvement. They believe that technique never stands alone. At the same time, teachers find it difficult to explain how something that is internal and unique to each human being and has no overt expression finally emerges via the martial art by which they have chosen to live. Aikido has many layers and processes, some of which are internal and completely invisible. However, all of this does not deny or minimize the technical knowledge and the physical fitness that the martial art demands. These are assumed.

This chapter has attempted to explain the added value unique to training in aikido, that of personal growth. It is a value that requires both master and student to be attentive to the range of conditions that go along with one becoming a mature human being. Aikido never boasts any teacher whose technique is impeccable but personality shallow.

Epilogue

Once I realized that I was going to compile my writings into a book, I knew the title. The traits represented by the unicorn have always been my companion and the compass for my aikido practice. The foremost thing the unicorn represents is the seeking or striving for an immeasurably valuable goal which is impossible to achieve. The meaning of my aikido practice has never been about acquiring any specific knowledge, as such knowledge ceases to challenge one the moment it has been acquired. In my aikido journey I have never felt like I have acquired the totality of anything specific once and for all. I feel, and have always felt, that there is still a long aikido journey ahead of me. I believe age has something to do with our experience of aikido and I am exploring the ways age is connected to it. One thing I have learned is that age brings a certain sense of human limitation. My ability is limited and so is my talent. So be it.

Life in the dojo is similar to life outside, in at least one respect. One progresses very quickly in the beginning but then comes a time of diminishing returns. Regardless of the effort, the progress slows but never ceases. I find beauty in this lengthy process. Through this process I have gained the ability to recognize and isolate even minute change. I am referring to the changes of personal transformation.

Chiba Sensei is mentioned often throughout this book. His skill as a martial artist and his outstanding personality have been a major influence in my life. He has always been an extraordinary teacher with the capacity to give and to touch others. I dare say that without his special skills and

personality, I would not have responded to him the way I did. It was as if he created an environment of fertile soil which waited for that one ingredient, a student, who would put down roots and grow strong and thrive. I am grateful to have been (and to be) his student.

A major theme connecting the chapters of this book relates to difficulties we encounter in our daily lives. Some of these struggles we see as internal and some we label as external, difficulties imposed upon us that need to be treated, resolved. Some difficulties are almost superficial and some touch us deeply and create a dividing line between success and failure. And, sometimes, we are not even aware of the issues and difficulties influencing our minds, bodies, and behaviors. The way of aikido imposes on us certain challenges for self-awareness, self-improvement, self-maturation that encourage not only a more advanced understanding and practice of aikido but personal growth in all aspects of life as well.

Above all, this book represents my own personal journey in the world of aikido, in general, and Birankai school, in particular. I hope you, the reader, will join me in this journey and, if my sharing what I have learned in my aikido journey leads you to experience insights of your own, I am honored.

Amnon Tzechovoy
Ramat Hasharon, Israel
May 2015

GLOSSARY

Ben-Meir, Eitan, 6th Dan: the founder and chief instructor of Aikido Carmel, Israel. Eitan Sensei was my first teacher.

Doran, Frank, 7th Dan, Shihan: the founder and chief instructor of Aikido West, USA.

Fleshler, Aki, 6th Dan, Shihan: the founder and technical director of Multnomah Aikikai, USA.

Mahler, Margaret Schönberger, 10 May 1897–2 October 1985, Psychoanalyst: Her main interest was in normal childhood development, but she spent much of her time with psychiatric children studying how they arrive at the "self." Mahler developed the separation-individuation theory of child development.

Mitsuzuka, Takeshi Sensei, 1926–2008: Mitsuzuka Sensei began his training in iaido on March 1, 1955, under the watchful eye of Nakayama Hakudo Sensei. Nakayama Sensei was eighty-five years old at the time and would live for only another three years. Mitsuzuka Sensei continued his training and modeled the Seiteigata in Gordon Warner and Donn Draeger's well-known book, *Japanese Swordsmanship*. Later he founded the San Shin Kai and began teaching iaido throughout the world.

Miyamoto, Tsuruzo, 7th Dan, Shihan: Hombu Dojo, Japan.

Mooney, Chris, 6th Dan, Shihan: the founder and chief instructor of Ei Mei Kan, UK.

O-Sensei: Morihei Ueshiba is the creator and founder of aikido. He is known as O-Sensei, the great teacher.

Seki, Shoji, 8th Dan, Shihan: Hombu Dojo, Japan.

Tamura, Nobuyoshi, 2 March 1933–9 July 2010: a prominent aikidoka and a direct student of Morihei Ueshiba, Osaka, Japan.

RECOMMENDED READINGS

Boroditsky, Lera. 2011. “How Language Shapes Thought.” *Scientific American.com*, (February 2011): 63–65.

Becker, Ernest. 1973. *The Denial of Death*. New York: The Free Press.

Buber, Marin. (1950) 1994. *The Way Of Man: According to the Teaching of Hasidism*, New York: Kensington Publishing Corp.

Deligne, Pierre. 1998. Quelques id´ees maˆıtresses de l’eouvre de A. Grothendieck, in ‘Mat´eriaux pour l’histoire des math´ematiques au XXe si`ecle (Nice, 1996)’, Soc. Math. France, pp. 11–19. New York: Citadel Press.

Floey, Lauren E., Gegear, Robert J., Reppert, Steven M. 2011. “Human cryptochrome exhibits light-dependent magnetosensitivity”. *Nature Communications* (online), Macmillan Publishers Limited.

Grothendieck, Alexander. 1985–1987. *R´ecoltes et Semailles*. Montpellier: Universit´e des Sciences et Techniques du Languedoc. Published in several successive volumes.

Hamilton, Christopher. 2001. *Living Philosophy: Reflections on Life, Meaning and Morality*., Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Herrigel, Eugen. (1953) 1981. *Zen in the Art of Archery*. Reprint, New York: Random House, Inc.

Levinas, Emmanuel. (1934) 1990. “Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism.” *Critical Inquiry* (17.1): 63–71.

Levinas, Emmanuel. (1963) 1990. “Spirit and Violence,” in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*. Reprint, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press. 6–7.

Mahler, Margaret S. 1975. *The Psychological Birth of the Human Infant Symbiosis and Individuation*. New York: Basic Books.

Marion, Jean-Luc. (2001) 2002. *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*.Paris: Presses Universitaires de France. Reprint, New York: Fordham University Press.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. (1945) 2012. *Phenomenology of Perception*. New York: Routledge.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. (1883–1891) 2006. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*. Reprint, Cambridge:Cambridge A Press.

Sartre, Jean-Paul. (1943) 1984. *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*. Reprint, New York: Washington Square Press.

Stern, Daniel N. 2010. *Forms of Vitality*. New York: Oxford University Press, Inc.

The Complete Works of Plato. 2011. *Meno*. Signature Edition. Jowett, Benjamin, Translator, The complete works collection, Latus ePublishing.

Vittorio, Gallese. 2011. “The ‘Shared Manifold’ Hypothesis From Mirror Neurons To Empathy”. *Journal of Consciousness Studies* (8.5-7):33-50.

Chiba Sensei wrote many interesting articles. Most of them can be found in the following Birankai's Journals:

Musubi and Shiun: http://www.birankai.eu/shiun_en.html

Biran Online: http://birankai.org/blog/